

Rethinking Kant

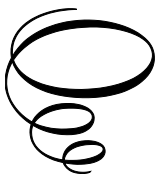
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NIETZSCHE VERSUS KANT ON THE POSSIBILITY OF RATIONAL SELF-CRITIQUE

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I. Introduction

Accounts of the relation between Nietzsche and Kant typically focus on moral and related metaphysical issues such as the categorical imperative, moral responsibility, and free will¹, or on epistemological topics such as Nietzsche's critique of Kant's view that we have the conceptual resources for a meaningful representation of things in themselves.² By contrast, in this essay I consider an epistemological, methodological dispute between these two thinkers about the possibility of *rational self-critique*: an activity where the intellect reflects on its cognitive powers, demarcates the proper use and limitations of these powers, and thereby achieves a systematically complete insight into what we can and cannot know. Kant affirms whereas Nietzsche denies that we can successfully conduct such a self-directed rational enquiry. My aim is to understand their respective arguments and the roots of their disagreement.

After setting the stage by introducing some key philosophical considerations, terms, and passages (section I), I reconstruct the central argumentative moves that Nietzsche and Kant do or could make to defend their respective position. In section II, I expound two central objections Nietzsche raises against the Kantian view. In section III, I show that Kant has a powerful rejoinder against these objections; however, as I argue in section IV, this rejoinder may not be ultimately effective in light of Nietzsche's most fundamental commitments. In the conclusion, I draw some general lessons from this debate. I suggest that trying to decide who

¹ See, e.g., Leiter 2015 and Reginster 2006.

² See, e.g., Clark 1990. The Nietzschean worry here (which figures prominently in, e.g., HAH) targets Kant's view that we can at least *think* (if not theoretically cognize) things in themselves (B166).

has the final upper hand here is less fruitful than recognizing that the two positions are rooted in starkly diverging concerns and aspirations. This reveals a clash between two distinctive models of philosophical enquiry, of what philosophy is and ought to be all about.

II. Setting the Stage: The Affirmation and Denial of Rational Self-Critique

In the Prefaces to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant presents a special kind of rational self-examination as the cornerstone of his philosophical project. This activity does not give us knowledge about our metaphysical constitution, nor does it provide us with privileged access to our mental states.³ Rather, rational self-critique reveals the scope and limits of our rational powers – namely, what these powers do and do not enable us to know, which principles our pure intellect contains, and how we can make a legitimate use of these principles. Because we exercise our rational powers only upon themselves rather than on external objects, such reflection (if properly conducted) yields fully comprehensive results. It makes clear and explicit, with systematic completeness, what our rationality involves, what pure reason can and cannot achieve: “nothing” in “the inventory of all we possess through pure reason...can escape us, because what reason brings forth entirely out of itself cannot be hidden, but is brought to light by reason itself” (Axx).

Kant’s main focus is on what epistemic self-critique reveals about the possibility of metaphysics: “pure speculative reason...can and should measure its own capacity” in order to “completely enumerate the manifold ways of putting problems before itself, so as to catalog the entire...sketch of a whole system of metaphysics” (Bxxii-Bxxiii). Reason’s self-measurement has a twofold upshot. On the one hand, reason provides a systematically complete account of the various metaphysical cognitions that it *can* achieve. On the other hand, it uncovers the insurmountable limits of its metaphysical insight and exposes the characteristic errors it commits when attempting to breach these limits.⁴ These errors result from a *lack* of epistemic self-critique, when one endorses “principles, which reason has been using for a

³ See Korsgaard 1996:92, 100.

⁴ The theoretical metaphysical cognition that self-critique vindicates is the immanent metaphysics of experience that comprises the categorical principle of understanding, such as ‘Every event has a cause’, if these are restricted to sensible appearances. On the other hand, the self-critique of pure reason shows that its transcendent ideas of God, the immortal soul and free will cannot yield theoretical cognition.

long time without first inquiring in what way and by what right it has obtained them”, when one follows “the dogmatic procedure of pure reason, without an antecedent critique of its own capacity” (Bxxxv).

Kant appeals to the power of rational self-critique throughout the first *Critique*, especially in the Transcendental Dialectic where he considers grand metaphysical questions in a “skeptical” (that is, properly self-critical, non-dogmatic) manner in order to “exempt oneself from a great deal of dogmatic rubbish, and put in its place a sober critique, which, as a true cathartic, will happily purge such delusions along with the punditry (*Vielwisserei*) attendant on them” (A486/B514). Kant has an unrelenting (decidedly *non-skeptical*⁵) confidence in the suitability of our intellect as the instrument for framing and answering questions about its own cognitive powers: pure reason, as the “highest court of appeals for all rights and claims of our speculation cannot possibly contain original deceptions and semblances” (A669/B697). His transcendental philosophy is unique “among all speculative cognition” because it “has the special property that there is no question at all dealing with an object given by pure reason that is insoluble by this very same human reason” (A477/B505); it is thus one of the “sciences whose nature entails that every question occurring in them must absolutely be answerable from what one knows, because the answer must arise from the same source as the question” (A476/B504). Because pure reason is the author of metaphysical concepts (‘ideas’, in Kant’s technical sense) such as ‘God’ or ‘the world’, it must be able to determine with strict, indubitable certainty what kind of cognition these concepts yield or fail to yield and what their legitimate or illegitimate use consists in. The method for reaching this determination is the assessment *of* pure reason *by* pure reason.

Kant also highlights the fundamental methodological role of infallible rational self-critique in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Its Preface announces that the book shall “critique...the entire practical faculty” of pure reason (KpV, 5:3). The “critique of practical reason as such” is concerned with “the principles of its possibility, its scope and limits”, which are to be determined in an a priori fashion, independent of any experience (KpV, 5:8). As in the first *Critique*, Kant stresses that it is entirely appropriate for pure reason to be at once the subject and the object of critique, to answer “questions, which pure reason puts to pure reason” (A486/B514). Only

⁵ Kant distinguishes between his skeptical method and skepticism (A424-425/B451-452). The skeptical method aims at (and attains) certainty – not regarding the objects of metaphysical speculation (such as God), but regarding the limits of what we can know about such objects. Skepticism, by contrast, leaves no room for certainty and thereby “undermines the foundation of all cognition.”

“pure reason...itself contains the standard” (*Richtschnur*) “for the critique of its entire use” (KpV, 5:16). That is, the normative criteria for answering reason’s questions about what we may justifiably believe and do can only come from pure reason itself. There is no other, external authority that could rightfully interfere with reason’s critical self-examination or replace pure reason’s autonomous *Richtschnur*. As Onora O’Neill points out, an external source could not lay any normative claim on us unless we first granted it the authority to do so through a process of critical reflection where reason uses its *own* normative guidelines to decide the self-directed question of whether and why it (i.e., *we*, as rational beings) should vindicate this external source.⁶

Nietzsche targets this Kantian methodology in the (added) Preface to *Dawn* (§3), when he asks provocatively about Kant’s critical project: “...was it not somewhat strange to demand that an instrument should criticize its own excellence and aptitude? that the intellect itself should ‘cognize’ its own worth, power, and limits? was it not even just a little absurd?” He also raises this concern in various unpublished notes composed in 1885-1886. Consider the following representative passages:

(1) It is almost comical, that our philosophers demand that philosophy has to begin with a critique of the faculty of cognition: is it not very improbable, that the organ of cognition can ‘critique’ itself, if one has become mistrustful about all previous results of cognition? (*NF 1885, Group 1 §60*)

(2) ...our critical philosophers...think that if one first examines the instrument before one applies it, namely the faculty of cognition — — — . This is even worse than wanting to examine a match before wanting to use it. It is the match that wants to examine itself whether it will burn (*NF 1885, Group 1 §113*)

(3) One would have to know what being is in order to determine whether this and that is real (for example, ‘the facts of consciousness’); likewise, what certainty is, what cognition is, and suchlike. — But since we do not know this, a critique of the faculty of cognition is absurd: how should an instrument critique itself, if it can use precisely only (*eben nur*) itself for critique? (*NF 1885, Group 2 §87*)

(4) An instrument cannot critique its own aptitude: the intellect cannot itself determine its limit, and neither its well-bredness or its ill-bredness (*sein Wohlgerathensein oder sein Mißrathensein*). — (*NF 1885, Group 2 §132*)

(5) The $\pi\rho\omega\tau\omicron\nu\ \psi\epsilon\upsilon\delta\omicron\varsigma$: how is the fact of cognition possible? Is cognition even a fact? (...) But if I do not yet ‘know’ whether there is

⁶ O’Neill 1989:15, 39.

cognition, I cannot reasonably pose the question, ‘what is cognition’. Kant believed in the fact of cognition: what he wants is a naive: the cognition of cognition! (*NF 1886, Group 7 §4*)

Although Kant is mentioned explicitly only in (5), the other fragments are clearly concerned with his position as well – Kant is chief amongst “our critical philosophers” who “demand that philosophy has to begin with a critique of the faculty of cognition” (cf. (1)-(2)).

Nietzsche’s points here reflect a broader epistemological interest in human cognition that figures prominently in his published works. This will become clear in the next section, where I reconstruct what I regard as Nietzsche’s two most important arguments against Kant’s method.

II.1: Nietzsche’s Objections: The Circularity Argument

The above passages suggest an objection that I call *the circularity argument*. According to this argument, the project of rational self-critique is viciously circular because when one tries to determine the cognitive aptitude and limitations of our intellect by exercising this very intellect in self-reflective enquiries, one must already take it for granted that our intellect does possess the cognitive aptitude required for successful critical self-examination – thus one presupposes what one purports to discern. This is Nietzsche’s point in passages such as (3) or (4), which target the avowedly self-reflexive aspect of Kant’s project, namely, the supposition that the pure intellect can simultaneously function as the agent and the object of critique.

An initial Kantian response might be that it is misleading to say that we take for granted *precisely* what we are trying to determine in rational self-critique. We seek to determine the general potentials and limits of our (especially metaphysical) cognition. When we embark on the project of self-critique we do *not* yet presume to know what these general potentials and limits are; we presuppose only that the pure intellect has the cognitive aptitude for discerning them. But for Nietzsche, this presupposition is already enough to entangle Kant in the vicious circle. Those who use the pure intellect to determine what it can and cannot cognize must assume that estimating its own cognitive capabilities and limitations lies within the pure intellect’s cognitive powers. Hence, the project of rational self-critique already presupposes an answer to the question that it purports to be raising: what are the pure intellect’s cognitive powers?

Kant might insist that he is presupposing only a strictly *limited* answer to the question he raises: he is assuming that the pure intellect has the power to recognize its own powers and limits, but this does not anticipate any

further, controversial claims – most importantly, it does not entail that we can or cannot cognize metaphysical objects such as God. Kant might say: because his presupposition does not presume substantive claims about our cognition of external (including transcendent) objects, it has a modest, purely methodological or subject-centered status: it amounts to nothing more than assuming from the outset that the activity of epistemic self-critique can succeed (if properly conducted). He might challenge Nietzsche to provide grounds for treating this assumption as a controversial idea that cannot be taken for granted as a legitimate starting point.

Nietzsche intimates such a ground in (1) when he asks: “is it not very improbable, that the organ of cognition can ‘critique’ itself, if one has become mistrustful about all previous results of cognition?” This suggests that the reason why he deems it question-begging to assume that our intellect can determine its own cognitive capabilities and limits is that we must regard the intellect as an inherently fallible cognitive instrument: hence, we cannot legitimately place the confidence in its potential for fruitful self-critique that the Kantian approach requires. What makes Nietzsche so “mistrustful about all previous results of cognition”? I will suggest one answer to this question in section II.2, where I consider Nietzsche’s debunking naturalistic account of our cognitive faculties. But Nietzsche’s mistrust need not rely on his own substantive views about our cognitive (in)capacities. Instead, he can motivate his doubts about the Kantian presupposition by invoking the long history of failed attempts to achieve rational self-cognition. This includes, specifically, the many times where philosophers since Descartes confidently proclaimed that they shall ground and delimit human cognition by investigating its sources but ended up with highly problematic doctrines that were duly criticized and rejected.⁷

Nietzsche also offers a principled explanation for these failures of self-cognition. In the (1887 addition to the) *Gay Science*, he argues that the intellect is particularly ill-suited for examining and cognizing itself because true cognition requires detachment from its object “as distant” from ourselves. Such an unbiased stance of critical distance is impossible when our intellect seeks to determine its own capacities. Hence, the idea that we should begin philosophical reflection by focusing on allegedly uncontroversial ‘facts of consciousness’ (cf. (3)) or ‘facts of cognition’ (cf. (5)) is flawed: the claim that it is “methodologically demanded to begin from the ‘inner world’, from the ‘facts of consciousness’ because it is the world more

⁷ Notably, this is similar to Kant’s strategy at the beginning of the *Critique*, when he appeals to the unhappy history of metaphysics (“the battlefield of endless controversies”, Aviii) to show that metaphysics is not (yet) a science.

familiar to us” yields only the “error of errors”. The sense of familiarity we assume with regard to our conscious mental states, including those that we are inclined to treat as cognitions, is precisely what prevents us from occupying the unbiased stance that would enable us to ask the proper questions about these states and thus to ‘cognize’ them in a proper sense: “The familiar (*das Bekannte*) is the usual (*das Gewohnte*); and the usual is hardest to ‘cognize’, which means to see as a problem, which means to see as alien, as distant, as ‘outside us’...” (GS V §355).

For Nietzsche, the pitfalls arising from this lack of detachment are especially severe when *philosophers* ruminates about human cognition: as historical-biographical interpretation reveals, they tend to do so in light of idiosyncratic personal values that are grounded in their unconscious drives, whose influence on conscious thought escapes their reflective self-awareness. These philosophical values include a high esteem for reflection, reason, and conscious awareness. In the *Gay Science* (GS IV §333), Nietzsche points out (echoing his remarks in (3) and (5)) that this uncritical valuation leads to confusion about what cognition fundamentally *is*. Targeting especially Spinoza’s definition of cognition as a state of calm, dispassionate rational equilibrium, he argues that philosophers have been led into error “about the nature of cognition” because they have placed undue emphasis on “conscious thinking, and especially that of the philosopher”: they have “viewed conscious thinking as thinking per se”, whereas “the by far largest part of our mental operating (*Wirken*) proceeds unconsciously, unfelt to us”. This point also plays a central role in *Beyond Good and Evil* where Nietzsche considers “the prejudices of philosophers”. One such prejudice is the conviction that conscious reflection operates autonomously, determines its own course and judgments. Historical-biographical analysis suggests that conscious philosophical reasoning does not set its own course but is rather determined by non-rational, non-conscious conditions: “the most conscious thinking of a philosopher is secretly led and forced into determinate paths by his instincts” (BGE I §3). These subjective, biased instincts and passions rather than an impersonal, purely rational appreciation of objective ‘facts of cognition’ determine the course and outcome of philosophical (self-)reflection: “Accordingly I do not believe that a ‘drive for cognition’ is the father of philosophy but, rather, that another drive...uses cognition (and misconception!) (*Erkenntnis (und Verkenntnis!)*) only like a tool” (BGE I §6).

Nietzsche is explicit about what he takes this non-cognitive drive to be in Kant’s case: Kant’s quest for epistemic self-cognition is instinctively guided by religious and moral biases. In one fragment (*NF 1886, Group 7 §4*), Nietzsche argues that the influence of these biases is twofold. First,

because of his “habituation to unconditional authorities” Kant regards pure reason as a quasi-divine legislator of timelessly valid, necessary laws, as an authority whose purely rational insight and legislative power is untainted by the contingencies of the fickle, immoral sensible world. Kant thus reveals his moral trust or faith in the existence of purely rational cognition: “...trust in reason...is, as trust, a moral phenomenon” (*Dawn*, Added Preface §4). “Kant believed in the fact of cognition...The rightfulness of the faith in cognition is always being presupposed: just like the rightfulness in the feeling of the judgment of conscience is being presupposed. Here the moral ontology is the reigning prejudice” (*NF 1886, Group 7 §4*). But secondly, moral and theistic interests also motivate Kant’s allegedly critical denial of pure reason’s knowledge claims about God or immortality: “To assert on the whole the existence of things about which we cannot know anything at all, precisely because there is an advantage in not being able to know anything about them, was a naivete of Kant, consequence of a refill (*Nachschlags*) of needs, namely moral-metaphysical ones” (*NF 1887, Group 10 §205*).

Nietzsche is presumably thinking here (in part) of Kant’s declaration, “Thus I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (Bxxx) in God, immortality, and free will. As Nietzsche sees it, Kant seeks to exploit the fact that by surrendering the claim to knowledge, moral faith in these entities need no longer justify itself *as knowledge*: once moral beliefs about supersensible beings are reconfigured as faith, they no longer incur the burden of proof that is imposed by the demanding knowledge-standard of justification. Since Kantian self-critique has shown that attempts to disprove the existence of supersensible beings violate the limits of human knowledge as well, the path is cleared for claiming that our moral faith in such beings is legitimate after all. This provides a “hiding place” (*Schlupfwinkel*) for those who seek to hold onto their faith in God, immortality etc. because they can “at last...create a right for themselves to affirm certain things as irrefutable – namely as beyond all means of refutation (this artifice nowadays calls itself ‘Kantian Criticism’)” (*NF 1888, Group 15 §19*; cf. GM III §26); “the typical philosopher is here an absolute dogmatic; — if he needs skepticism, this is in order to be allowed to talk dogmatically about his main issue” (*NF 1888, Group 14 §189*). Kant’s purportedly anti-dogmatic rational self-critique thus reveals “the theological prejudice in Kant, his unconscious dogmatism, his moral perspective as ruling, steering, commanding” (*NF 1887, Group 7 §4*). The moral perspective is steering insofar as it leads Kant to posit a (theoretically speaking) uncognizable realm of non-sensible things in themselves that is impervious to the

contingent, ‘immoral’ character of the cognizable sensible world, of our empirical nature and history (*Dawn, Added Preface §3*).

One might seek to dismiss these points as mere *ad hominem* attacks that lack argumentative weight. But they are clearly relevant to the question of whether Kant may start his project of rational self-critique from the unquestioned assumption that the pure intellect can (infallibly, systematically) determine its own cognitive capabilities and limitations. For Nietzsche, this is a controversial assumption that a non-question begging pursuit of epistemic self-cognition would need to establish in the first place. If Kantians respond that this assumption expresses no more than a harmless methodological guideline, then it seems appropriate for Nietzsche to counter by stressing Kant’s personal investment in the project of epistemic self-critique: led by his allegedly innocuous guideline, Kant develops an account of human cognition that so happens to justify highly controversial (moral, metaphysical, theistic) beliefs to which Kant is personally attached.⁸ Kant thereby provokes a mistrust in his or more generally the human ability to accurately measure our cognitive capacities in an objective, unbiased fashion. This mistrust provides a valid reason for questioning the presupposition that we indeed possess this ability. For Nietzsche, this is sufficient to show that the Kantian project is viciously circular, since it (on the one hand) purports to determine what our cognitive powers are, but (on the other hand) already takes for granted the determination that we do have the power to obtain indubitably certain epistemic self-cognition.

II.2 Nietzsche’s Objections: Naturalism about Human Cognition

In his first objection, Nietzsche raises doubts about whether we have the cognitive powers for epistemic self-cognition required by the Kantian project via his appeal to the long comedy of errors that characterize the history of philosophy, and via his observation that philosophers are led to these errors because their reasoning is in the grip of (chiefly, theistic and moral) biases and prejudices. By contrast, his second objection relies more decisively on his own substantive views about the character of human

⁸ It is somewhat controversial whether Kant is really attached to these beliefs. In his seminal biography, Kuehn (2001:3) denies that Kant had any personal belief in God and immortality. Even if that is correct, Nietzsche can still invoke Kant’s putative moral-metaphysical ‘prejudices’ such as the belief in timeless, universal moral values or in absolute free will and responsibility. Kuehn agrees (2001:145, 379-382) that the belief in transcendental freedom was central to the way in which Kant lived and philosophized.

cognition. I cannot do full justice here to Nietzsche's complex thoughts on human cognition, and I cannot consider how these thoughts evolved and changed during the 1870s and 1880s. But I shall expound five aspects of his view that frequently recur both in the earlier (1870s) and later (1880s) periods of his thinking.

First, Nietzsche's view is thoroughly naturalistic.⁹ For Nietzsche, our cognitive faculties belong to the natural order of things, just like the faculties of other creatures: they have been gradually acquired in a long historical process which was shaped by contingent, shifting biological and sociocultural circumstances.¹⁰ This process eventually produced in human beings a range of relatively stable, uniform cognitive dispositions. This naturalism contrasts sharply with Kant's view that our fundamental cognitive capacities (chiefly, our pure forms of sensibility and our pure intellect with its a priori forms of judgment and concepts) belong to our atemporal noumenal character which is not subject to the vagaries of the contingent, ever-changing empirical world.

Second, our cognitive dispositions are controlled by *desiderative* natural states that are oriented towards goals such as securing survival, enhancing one's well-being, and increasing one's sense of power.¹¹ Hence the focus of our cognitive dispositions is distorted: our cognitive attention is directed only to certain aspects of the world (at the expense of others), namely those that have a bearing on our desires' satisfaction. This point, taken by itself, would render our representations partial but not necessarily false or inaccurate: even if we represent only features of the world that bear on the satisfaction of our desires, our representations might provide objective cognition of said features. Likewise, a functionalist or pragmatic explanation of our cognitive dispositions which explains these dispositions in terms of their success in helping us fulfil our practical interests is compatible with

⁹ For a helpful characterization of Nietzsche's naturalism, see Leiter 2015:1-23, 244-263.

¹⁰ See, e.g., *Dawn* II §123.

¹¹ It is unclear what Nietzsche means by 'power' when he posits the will to power as a (or even *the*) fundamental drive directing human (and other organic) life. Some commentators adopt a 'formal' reading of the will to power as a second-order drive to have one's first-order desires (regarding external objects) satisfied (Clark 1990:228-229) or to overcome resistance in trying to satisfy first-order desires (Reginster 2006:131-132). Another important question here is whether Nietzsche's appeals to the will to power express *descriptive* (empirical? metaphysical?) claims, or an *evaluative* ideal, or a combination of both. An evaluative reading is proposed by Clark 1990, whereas Richardson 1996 (following Heidegger) defends a staunchly metaphysical view.

our cognitive dispositions being truth-tracking. One might even hold that the pragmatic approach predicts that these dispositions *are* mostly truth-tracking, since by delivering accurate representations they enable us to effectively realize our desires.

However, Nietzsche does not endorse these (somewhat) conciliatory ideas. In his view, the truthfulness of our representations is not generally conducive and may even be a severe hindrance to the satisfaction of our strongest or most prevalent desires. Although it is not implausible to suggest that in his more cautious moments Nietzsche argues only that pragmatic usefulness does not guarantee truthfulness, he typically puts forward a stronger claim: since our cognitive faculties are shaped by (broadly speaking) pragmatic interests, they are ill-suited to provide us with cognition if ‘cognition’ is understood in the traditional sense as grasping facts or truths (conceived in a non-pragmatic fashion¹²) and as enabling objective knowledge.¹³ The basic actions of our cognitive faculties *falsify* the actual character of the natural world, so that we end up representing the world – even in our best scientific thinking – in fictitious ways which are conducive to realizing our basic desires.¹⁴ This process of falsification, invention or subjective interpretation involves various mechanisms (some of which are operative already in our faculties of sensory representation), such as: simplifying what is inherently complex; leveling what is inherently diverse; and, “reducing something unfamiliar”, potentially unsettling “to something familiar” – here “the first representation through which the unfamiliar explains itself as familiar feels so pleasant that one ‘takes’ it ‘as true’” (TI, “The four big errors” §5).¹⁵ These mechanisms introduce order, unity, and regularity into our conception of reality, so that we exercise a corresponding degree of (imaginary) control over the thus-conceived natural world: thanks to the simplifying, leveling, and familiarizing acts of our cognitive faculties, we apprehend the world in an anthropocentric manner that enables us to feel at home in it, to calculate the consequences of our actions and to satisfy our desires.

¹² It is worth noting that Nietzsche does not, *pace* Danto 1980, define ‘truth’ or ‘facts’ in pragmatic terms: if he did, he could not say that pragmatic drives *falsify* our representations of facts. See Clark 1990:32-34.

¹³ See, e.g., BGE I §6, §11; BGE VII §229-230; NF 1886 Group 6, §8, 11.

¹⁴ See, e.g., GS II § 107; GS III §111; BGE I §11; BGE 2 § 24; BGE IX §291; NF 1885, Group 43 §1. These and related passages lead me to prefer the ‘falsification’ interpretation over the more cautious reading. I further support this interpretation in section 3.

¹⁵ See also *Dawn* II §111, 117; GS V §355; BGE V §192; BGE VII §230-231; GM III § 24.

The third aspect of Nietzsche's view is that the desiderative states that control our basic cognitive actions operate below the threshold of consciousness and are therefore concealed from our reflective self-awareness.¹⁶ As a result, our conscious mental thinking does not possess the kind of autonomous influence that philosophers have traditionally ascribed to it: the causal force and guiding role of reflective thinking is strongly demoted in Nietzsche's view. He attributes a quasi-epiphenomenal status to our conscious thoughts and regards them as mere by-products or accompanying appearances of the underlying non-conscious desiderative states that are really taking the reins in determining our theoretical and practical worldview (as well as our corresponding behavior).¹⁷

Fourth, the subjective-falsifying character of our cognitive capacities also affects those of our conscious representations and thought-patterns that philosophers have traditionally viewed as signatures of pure rationality and (thus) as guides to the metaphysical structure of 'being', in part because they constitute our basic grammatical forms of thinking.¹⁸ This includes mathematical concepts, logical rules, and the Kantian categories, i.e., basic ontological concepts such as 'substance' or 'causality'.¹⁹ Since these representations are a product of our cognitive dispositions, they are infected with the abovementioned simplifying, leveling, and anthropomorphizing tendencies that shape these dispositions. For instance, grasping the world in logical and mathematical terms (e.g., via formulas and numbers) operates on the assumption that there are generic identities among numerically different objects. This basic assumption also underlies our classificatory conceptual schemes, including those we use in advanced scientific thinking. But it masks the endless complexity and diversity in nature, which would be too much to handle for our pragmatically driven cognitive system.²⁰ The notion that the empirical world consists of substances that remain identical over time is another cognitive crutch that our intellect uses to make a restlessly changing reality amenable to our need for continuity, by projecting diachronic identities onto this reality; likewise, our causal thinking is designed to cover up the fickle, chaotic character of the natural world with a semblance of regularity, stability, and calculability.²¹

¹⁶ See, e.g., GS IV §333; BGE I §3, §6.

¹⁷ See, e.g., *Dawn* II § 109.

¹⁸ See, e.g., NF 1886, Group 6 §13.

¹⁹ See, e.g., GS III §110-111, 121; TI, 'Reason' in *Philosophy* §3, 5; NF 1885, Group 43 §1; NF 1886, Group 6 §8, 11.

²⁰ See, e.g., GS III § 111-112; NF 1886 Group 6, §14.

²¹ See, e.g., *Dawn* II §121; GS III §111-112.

A fifth aspect of Nietzsche's view is his claim that the falsifying tendencies of our cognitive faculties lead to deeply engrained misrepresentations of these faculties and of our own selves.²² Chief amongst these misrepresentations is the belief in a unified substantial self, soul or *ego* that persists and retains its identity and internal unity over time.²³ Relatedly, we are firmly attached to the false idea that our substantial self has an abiding rational core that is realized in our conscious thinking, and to the associated idea that our conscious, reflective thoughts cause our judgments and behavior.²⁴ These misconceptions encourage the illusion that we possess the rational freedom to think and act without being conditioned by contingent non-rational factors that lie outside of our control (such as our subconscious drives), and that we are personally responsible in an absolute metaphysical sense for our judgments and actions.²⁵

On the aforementioned cautious reading, where Nietzsche's naturalistic view of our cognitive dispositions is meant to show only that the desiderative or pragmatic character of these dispositions does not guarantee the truthfulness of our representations, Nietzsche's naturalism yields just another version of the previous circularity argument: Nietzsche invokes naturalistic considerations regarding the character of human cognition to show that it would be question-begging or circular to put the trust in the cognitive powers of reason that is needed for the Kantian project to get off the ground (whereas the circularity objection considered in II.1. was based chiefly on historical, including biographical analysis). But on the (in my view) textually more compelling reading where Nietzsche argues that the naturalistic character of our cognitive dispositions shows them to be inherently unreliable, Nietzsche's fivefold naturalistic account implies that the Kantian project of rational self-critique is not only circular but rests on mistaken views about human cognition. The Kantian project seeks to determine, with objective rational certainty, what our cognitive capabilities and limitations are. It thereby presupposes that we have the rational power to step aside from our personal motives and biases so that we may take a critical distance towards ourselves and assess our cognitive faculties in an objective, truth-oriented manner (the truths at issue being truths about what we can and cannot know). As Christine Korsgaard put it, "the reflective structure of human consciousness gives us authority over ourselves. Reflection gives us a kind of distance from our impulses which...enables

²² See, e.g., *Dawn* II §119.

²³ See, e.g., BGE, Preface.

²⁴ See, e.g., GS III § 110; BGE I §16-17; BGE VII §231.

²⁵ See, e.g., *Dawn* II §116; GM I § 13.

us...to make laws for ourselves.”²⁶ For Nietzsche, this betrays a misconception of what our reflective intellect is and how it works: since the basic character of conscious reflection is constituted and controlled by falsifying (oversimplifying, over-unifying, etc.) subjective drives that do not aim at truth or ‘cognition’ in the traditional (truth-oriented, objective) sense of that term, conscious self-reflection cannot afford us a stance of critical distance from these subjective drives and thus cannot provide us with an objectively certain, unbiased estimation of what we can and cannot know. Indeed, for Nietzsche the presupposition that we can achieve such self-knowledge through acts of purely rational self-reflection is *itself* a product of unconscious subjective forces that goad philosophers to adopt a false but flattering sense of their rational powers: especially if this inflated self-conception and the thought processes spurred by it lead to further subjectively comforting beliefs (such as the metaphysical-moralistic-theistic beliefs that Nietzsche views as Kant’s basic prejudices).²⁷

III. The Kantian Rejoinder

In this section, I expound the (in my estimation) strongest Kantian defense against Nietzsche’s objections. The passage where Kant mounts this defense occurs in the Preface to the second *Critique* – which is fitting since (cf. section 1) Kant here explicitly discusses his core methodological idea that pure reason can provide a cogent epistemic self-critique. He says:

Nothing worse could happen to these labors than that anyone should make the unexpected discovery that there neither is, nor can be, any a priori cognition at all. But there is no danger of this. This would be the same thing as if one sought to prove by reason that there is no reason. For...rational cognition and cognition a priori are one and the same. It is a clear contradiction to try to extract necessity from a principle of experience...and to try by this to give a judgement true universality (without which there is

²⁶ Korsgaard 1996:128-129.

²⁷ Ascribing to Nietzsche the falsification thesis (as opposed to the moderate-cautious stance) raises intricate questions. How could he claim to know that our cognitive dispositions are falsifying? Is he being dogmatic in deeming reason unreliable? For discussion of these issues, see Anderson 2005; Hussain 2007; Clark 1990. Perhaps Nietzsche (like Hume) holds that we can – through (“ascetic”) mental self-discipline and in response to epistemically viable (naturalistic) evidence – recognize and resist the falsifying habits of our cognitive faculties in rare moments (if only to recognize what these habits and errors are) but must succumb to them once we relax our self-constraint (as we must in order to live). Whether this yields a viable position is a different question, which I address in sections 3 and 4.

no rational inference...). To substitute subjective necessity, that is, custom, for objective, which exists only in a priori judgements, is to deny to reason the power of judging about the object, i.e., of cognizing it, and what belongs to it. It implies, for example, that we...reject the notion of cause altogether as false and a mere delusion. (KpV, 5:12)

Kant's target here is Hume's empiricism (see KpV, 5:13; B5; A94/B128).²⁸ It is controversial to what extent Nietzsche's views can be compared to Hume's. Some commentators see a close connection between the two philosophers as far as their general naturalistic outlook is concerned.²⁹ However, Nietzsche shows very limited knowledge of or interest in Hume's philosophy; his rejection of Locke's account of the origin of human ideas (in BGE I §20) suggests that he would not be on board with all major tenets of Hume's naturalistic empiricism either (since Locke's account closely resembles Hume's copy principle). Nevertheless, the above passage indicates how Kant would respond to Nietzsche's objections: these objections rely on assumptions which are relevantly similar to the Humean claims that Kant addresses.

Let us consider first how Kant's rejoinder bears upon the second objection, which derives from Nietzsche's naturalistic view of human cognition. The five elements (sketched in II.2.) which comprise this view involve various naturalistic claims about the character of both our cognitive dispositions and the external world. Based on the above passage, we can expect Kant to point out that such claims, if they are to be taken seriously within a philosophical or (broadly speaking) scientific debate, must be based upon pure a priori reason: they must aspire to yield rational cognition, must demand intersubjective agreement among rational thinkers, and must therefore lay claim to objective truth and universal validity (see, e.g., Prol, 4:299).³⁰ If Nietzsche were to admit that his own naturalistic claims are the upshot of the truth-indifferent empirical mechanisms that according to his naturalistic theory control our cognitive output, then he would be pulling

²⁸ For helpful discussion of how this passage contributes to Kant's overall response to Hume, see Engstrom 1994.

²⁹ See, e.g., Leiter 2015:1-10. For further Hume-Nietzsche comparisons, see Beam 1996 and Kail 1996.

³⁰ The reach for intersubjective agreement which Kant deems essential to the act of rational judging does not entail that one must engage in actual communication with other thinkers: it requires only (but essentially) that we regard our judgments as answerable to *potential* rational interlocutors, namely, that we judge "as it were in community with others to who we communicate our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us" (O, 8:144).

the rug out from under his own feet. He would have to admit that his naturalistic claims have no a priori rational basis and thus cannot make a rational claim on other thinking subjects who aim to discern objective truths about human cognition.

Those who read Nietzsche as a staunch empiricist might suggest that Nietzsche can respond here by denying Kant's claim that "rational cognition and cognition a priori are one and the same".³¹ According to this response, Nietzsche's naturalistic objection to Kant's project targets primarily the 'purist' pretensions inherent in this project: namely, the idea that one can critique and vindicate human cognition on an a priori basis, independently of experience. By severing Kant's tie between rational and a priori cognition, Nietzsche can hold that his own views about human cognition have objective validity (and thus can demand rational agreement from others) because they are based on good empirical evidence.

It is unclear whether this empiricist rendering of Nietzsche's position is defensible. It requires, among other things, that Nietzsche eventually abandons his aforementioned point that our faculties of *sensory* representation already incorporate pragmatically fueled cognitive biases and falsifications.³² But even assuming that an empiricist account which views the senses (unlike 'pure reason') as epistemically trustworthy can be attributed to Nietzsche, Kant would insist that the empiricist counter to his rejoinder runs into two problems.

For one, whatever accurate information the senses may provide, cognitive output in the form of judgments or theories occurs only once this sensory material has been conceptually interpreted by our intellectual faculties. This could hardly be denied by Nietzsche, who frequently emphasizes the role such interpretation plays in determining our beliefs. It seems implausible (and Nietzsche never suggests) that an accurate account of complex natural phenomena can simply be read off a given mass of raw sensory data which have objective evidential significance despite their lack of conceptual structure. But if – as Nietzsche stresses (see, e.g., TI, 'Reason' in *Philosophy* §2) – the process of conceptually interpreting sensory data

³¹ Leiter attributes to Nietzsche an "explicit empiricism" (2015:11).

³² Some commentators hold that in his late works such as the *Twilight of Idols*, Nietzsche moves towards a view where the senses (untainted by the fictitious concepts of 'pure reason') yield accurate information about empirical reality (see, for instance, Clark 1991:103-116; Leiter 2015:12-13). There are passages in TI that can be taken to support such a reading (see especially §2, 3 of 'Reason' in *Philosophy*). But I am not sure that the sparse remarks that Nietzsche makes here in a strongly polemic context (of inveighing against rationalistic pretensions) warrant attributing to him a new, decidedly empiricist epistemological orientation.

characteristically involves the falsifying mechanisms explicated in II.2., then we are back to Kant's point that Nietzsche's account of human cognition is self-undermining because the falsifications that, according to this account, shape all human thinking also affect Nietzsche's own thoughts about human cognition.

Secondly, Nietzsche's account employs specific representations that cannot be vindicated on an empirical basis. When Kant equates "rational cognition" and "cognition a priori", he supports this by arguing that sense-experience – or any other merely empirical, e.g., a psychological source – cannot vindicate claims to *necessity* and strict (rather than merely comparative, inductive) universality (cf. EEUK 20:238 and Refl. 18:176). Nietzsche claims that given the naturalistic basis of human cognition, there *cannot* be the a priori (self-)cognition to which the Kantian project aspires; but for Kant, the modal strength of this assertion – the idea that a priori (self-)cognition is *impossible* – requires an a priori cognitive source. Thus, Kant would deem Nietzsche's attack on the possibility of a priori (self-)cognition incoherent since it relies on the actuality of a priori (self-)cognition.

One might suggest that Nietzsche can avoid this problem by weakening the modal strength of his objection: rather than deeming a priori rational self-cognition impossible, he might instead hold that in light of what we can empirically cognize about human cognition, we have no good reason to expect that a priori rational self-cognition is possible; its possibility cannot be established. From an interpretive standpoint, this suggestion is problematic because it fails to capture the characteristic lack of modesty in Nietzsche's relevant assertions, not just in polemical works such as *Beyond Good and Evil* where, one might argue, the modal strength of Nietzsche's claims is mostly a rhetorical tool. In *Dawn* (II §117), he holds that due to our falsifying habits which "are the foundation of all our judgments and 'cognitions'...we cannot catch anything other" than what fits into our illusory cognitive web. In *Twilight of Idols (Reason' in Philosophy* §5), he insists that the prejudices of 'reason' "force us" to "posit unity, identity, permanence, substance, cause" and thereby "necessitate us to error".

But there is a further problem with the idea that Nietzsche can avoid Kant's rejoinder by abandoning the modal concepts which are inadequately supported by sense-experience. These concepts seem indispensable for Nietzsche's naturalistic account of cognition and (thereby) for his naturalistic objection against the Kantian project. Consider here an important passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

...it is high time to replace the Kantian question, 'How are synthetic judgments a priori possible?' by another question, 'Why is belief in such judgments necessary?'—namely, to comprehend that such judgments must

be believed to be true, for the sake of the preservation of creatures like ourselves; though they might obviously still be false judgments! Or, more plainly spoken...synthetic judgments a priori...are nothing but false judgments. However...the belief in their truth is necessary, as a foreground-belief (*Vordergrundsglaube*) and appearance (*Augenschein*) which belongs to the perspective- optics of life. (BGE I §12)

The Kantian question to which Nietzsche refers here is precisely the question that epistemic self-critique seeks to answer: to what extent can our intellect achieve a kind of cognition that is both independent of experience and yet truly informative (“amplifying”) rather than a mere analytic explication of our concepts? Kant argues that we can answer this question and vindicate some synthetic a priori judgments – namely, those which apply categories like ‘substance’ and causality’ to sensible appearances – as true if we carefully attend to the structure of our cognitive faculties. Nietzsche here (and elsewhere) deems all so-called synthetic a priori judgments epistemically ungrounded, even false: categories such as ‘causality’ or ‘substance’ (no less than transcendent ideas like ‘God’ or ‘free will’) are cognitive fictions that are inextricably bound up with the non-rational, falsifying dispositions of the human mind (cf. II.2). But he also says that the judgments which apply such categories “*must* be believed to be true”, that “the belief in their truth is *necessary*” (emphasis mine): this belief belongs to the subjective perspective that the human organism has to occupy given its natural life conditions. Nietzsche here employs a modally strong concept of causation that implies a necessary constraint: he views the psycho-physical constitution of the human organism as a non-rational natural cause which makes it inevitable for human beings to adopt those fictitious beliefs that Kant deems ‘synthetic a priori’.

One might respond by suggesting that given the polemical character of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche’s strong modal-causal pronouncements in this passage are just rhetorical hyperbole and hence do not betray a commitment to the existence of causal necessities. However, Nietzsche makes similar pronouncements in many other works and contexts as well. For instance, in the *Gay Science* (GS III §111), when he discusses the ‘illogical’, i.e., unreasonable origin of logic, he argues that the strong “propensity...to treat the similar as identical, an illogical propensity – since there is nothing identical in itself – has created all foundation of logic in the first place”; likewise, in order for the concept of substance (which is “indispensable to logic” but to which “nothing real corresponds”) to arise in our mind, “for a long time the changing in things had not to be seen, not to be felt”. He traces these fictitious concepts and inferential patterns to the

pragmatic advantages that they afford creatures which possess them, compared to creatures whose thinking is more cautious and more attuned to the non-substantial, diverse character of natural reality. Here Nietzsche provides a naturalistic explanation of our falsifying cognitive habits that employs a modally strong notion of causation: he argues that certain natural propensities driven by organic needs “created” or *produced*, were thus *causally sufficient* for the development of our concepts and inference-patterns. These propensities could have arisen only in creatures whose senses failed to grasp the true character of reality for a long time, which entails that such prolonged misperceptions were *causally necessary* for the development of our cognitive traits. Nietzsche further remarks that “every high degree of caution in inferring, every skeptical propensity is already a great danger for life. No living beings would be preserved if the contrary propensity had not been bred (*angezüchtet*) with extraordinary strength – the propensity rather to affirm than suspend judgment, rather to err and invent than wait”. This counterfactual claim also has a modal strength that goes beyond what we can empirically observe, since it envisages the non-actual effects (namely, the extinction of living beings) that would follow if an actually effective cause (namely, the disposition to judge rashly and incautiously) failed to be effective.

It is hard to see how any constructive naturalistic account can do without positing natural causes that are sufficient to produce (and can therefore be cited in naturalistic explanations of) certain outcomes, and that operate only under certain necessary conditions. If such accounts imply that our modally rich causal beliefs are unreasonable, they seem to be pulling the rug from under their own feet.³³ Kant would thus hold that Nietzsche here ends up in

³³ For Leiter, “causation, and causal explanation, is central to Nietzsche’s naturalism” (2015:255). He identifies many passages and contexts (beside the ones I noted) where Nietzsche seems to rely on causal claims. However, Leiter does not reconcile this with Nietzsche’s prevailing view that the representation of causation (just like that of substance, etc.) is merely “invented” by the human mind, that “one should use ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ only as...conventional fictions for the purpose of designation and communication – *not* for explanation” (BGE I §21; cf. GS III §112). Sometimes it seems that Leiter wants to treat this as a mere relic of Nietzsche’s earlier “Neo-Kantian skepticism about causation” that Nietzsche allegedly abandoned in his mature works (Leiter 2015:18, 254-255). But Nietzsche still includes causation among other subjective fictions such as substance, unity, identity etc. in the *Twilight of Idols* (*‘Reason in Philosophy’* §5), which supposedly (on Leiter’s and Clark’s reading) manifests Nietzsche’s turn towards a non-skeptical empiricism. Sometimes Leiter seems to be flirting with the idea that Nietzsche, like (allegedly) Hume, accepts an empiricist regularity notion of causation as mere constant conjunction and denies rational justification only to the stronger notion of causal necessity

the same boat as Hume, whose natural science of the mind makes modally strong causal claims that undermine the rational basis of his own causal beliefs: Hume posits non-rational associative customs which “carry” the mind to form certain causal expectations under certain conditions (such as repeated observation of the same sequence of event-types) so that a causal “belief is the necessary”, “unavoidable” “result of placing the mind in such circumstances” (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section V §38). For Kant, since the modally rich concept of causality cannot be legitimately drawn from sense-experience it “must either be grounded in the understanding completely a priori or else be entirely surrendered as a mere figment of the brain” (A91/B123-124). This surrendering occurs in naturalistic genealogies which trace this concept to subjective, non-rational mechanisms that force upon us beliefs in the existence of objectively real causal relations. “To substitute subjective necessity, that is, custom, for objective (necessity), which exists only in a priori judgements, is to deny to reason the power of judging about the object, i.e., of cognizing it” (KpV, 5:11). But naturalists also rely upon their power of judging about objects when they theorize that non-rational causal mechanisms produce our cognitive output (only) under certain conditions. In proposing such theories, they assume that their own causal judgments have an objectively rational basis. For Kant, naturalists like Nietzsche or Hume presuppose the a priori cognitive resources of our intellect (such as the category of ‘causality’) when they argue that our intellect is incapable of a priori rational cognition; hence, they incoherently seek “to prove by reason that there is no reason”.³⁴

It is not so obvious that Kant’s rejoinder also addresses Nietzsche’s first objection, the circularity argument, since this argument does not rely on naturalistic causal claims about how human cognition operates. Perhaps Kant’s rejoinder might be adapted to the circularity argument as follows. According to this argument, Kant’s project to determine our cognitive capabilities and limitations moves in a vicious circle since it already presupposes the controversial claim that our intellect *can* determine its cognitive capabilities and limitations. Kant might try to turn the tables

(Leiter 2015:8-9, 257). But Nietzsche stresses that the appeal to observed regular successions fails to provide genuine causal explanations (GS III §112). Moreover, as we saw, there are many passages where he uses the modally stronger notion.

³⁴ Clark and Dudrick 2012 argue that Nietzsche *accepts* the considerations revealing the need for a priori concepts (which, they claim, he found in the work of Afrikan Spir) and abandons naturalism on this basis. I cannot engage with this reading here, but it is worth noting that it flies in the face of much textual evidence (some of which I cite above); hence Clark and Dudrick present their reading as capturing the allegedly “esoteric” message of Nietzsche’s works.

against Nietzsche: he might say that Nietzsche's circularity argument is itself circular (involves the incoherent strategy "to prove by reason that there is no reason") because it employs the faculty of reason in order to raise a *rationaly compelling* doubt about the viability of the Kantian project. In this argument, Nietzsche invokes an a priori standard which governs what we are rationally entitled to believe: namely, a formal standard of coherence prescribing that we must not assume the very claim that we set out to prove. For Kant, this shows that no rational process of doubting, critique, or argumentation can get off the ground without placing a robust methodological trust in our basic rational capacities and the cognitive norms that arise from these capacities, a trust which also provides the legitimate starting point for epistemic rational self-critique. As O'Neill suggests, the problem with skeptical attempts to question the authority of reason is that the act of "intelligible questioning presumes the very authority it seeks to question".³⁵

Nietzsche might respond that this Kantian reaction to his circularity argument does not truly establish the Kantian project to be non-circular: it does not positively restore the coherence of already trusting the pure intellect's power of self-reflection when trying to determine the intellect's capacities and limits. The Kantian rejoinder only attacks the coherence of Nietzsche's attempt to undermine this trust by relying on intellectual-logical standards of coherence. This seems to yield a stalemate rather than a decisive advantage for the Kantian view, although Kantians might seek to interpret this stalemate as a victory, or at least as sufficient for their intents and purposes. Nietzsche might try to break this stalemate by arguing that his presupposition is much less ambitious than the Kantian one: while his circularity argument indeed presupposes our intellectual capacity to employ valid logical norms, this is not nearly as controversial as assuming that reason has the much stronger intellectual power to determine (with certainty and systematic completeness) the entire scope of its cognitive capabilities and limitations. To see that the cognitive power of assessment required by Kant's project goes beyond the capacity for logically valid thinking, consider Kant's ambition to have reason adjudicate over *synthetic* a priori judgments

³⁵ O'Neill 1989:42. There is much I agree with in her pioneering account of how Kant conceives reason's self-reflexive vindication in non-solipsistic terms, as a public act. But I do not accept her idea that rational self-vindication is *anti-foundationalist*, a reflective process where we initially lack "any way of judging what reason is" (1989:9), which has a "recursive" character that always allows for questioning previous assumptions and precludes definite answers (1989:21). Here O'Neill underestimates the extent to which for Kant all rational activities (including constructive planning procedures) are governed by foundational, certain principles of pure reason.

where the question of justifiability or truth cannot be settled by appeal to merely logical standards such as coherence (which might suffice to vindicate analytic judgments).

However, Nietzsche may no longer be entitled to this response if he combines it with his naturalistic view that *even logical* rules (like coherence) spring from falsifying pragmatic instincts. It may thus be sufficient for Kant's purposes that he has a strong point against Nietzsche's naturalistic view of human cognition: this view both employs and yet purports to undermine central intellectual standards, both standards of formal logic and extra-logical rules such those governing legitimate causal reasoning. Since this naturalistic view is a core aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy, Kant's rejoinder raises a crucial issue for Nietzsche's attempts to undermine the Kantian methodological framework.

IV. Nietzsche's Demotion of Reason, Truth, and Knowledge

Should Nietzsche concede that in light of Kant's rejoinder, he must withdraw his objections against the Kantian project of rational self-critique? I will suggest that Kant's rejoinder may lack genuine force from Nietzsche's considered point of view, as informed by his deepest philosophical concerns. Here I will draw on an aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy that is a recurrent theme in his thinking from the early 1870s to the late 1880s: his demotion of reason, truth, and knowledge from pinnacles of philosophical achievement to engines of nihilism and pessimism. I will first explain this demotion and then clarify how it bears on the debate between Nietzsche and Kant.

Nietzsche's suspicion about whether the pursuit of truth, rationality, and knowledge is conducive to human flourishing makes a first prominent appearance in the *Birth of Tragedy*. Here he views the creative tendencies to falsify, feign, and invent, which are most pronounced in aesthetic production and experience, as forces that can replenish our vital energies and that can overcome the life-negating attitudes which arise from knowing the true character of reality. Art "wants to convince us of the eternal lust and delight of existence" (80); the "drive which calls art into being...seduces us into continuing to live" (24), whereas "gazing into the inner, terrible depths of nature" (46) leads to Silenus' "wisdom" that for human beings "the very best thing is...not to be, to be nothing" and "the second best thing...is: to die soon" (23). Thus, "knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion" (40). The life-affirming creative powers of humanity were at their height in Homeric Greek culture but began to

dwindle under the anti-aestheticist, intellectualist influence of Plato and Socrates who championed the unconditional worth of rationality, science, and knowledge: Socratic-rationalistic “dialectic drives music out of tragedy under the lash of its syllogisms” (70).

Similarly, in his essay on the dangers of excessive historical knowledge (the 1874 second *Untimely Meditation*), Nietzsche warns that the quest for “historical verification” destroys “the mood of pious illusion in which alone anything that wants to live can live” and be creative (95); “everything... that possesses life... ceases to live when it is dissected completely, and lives a painful and morbid life when one begins to practice historical dissection upon it” (97). Notably, these excesses of “historical sense” include evolutionary doctrines about the natural history of mankind, which imply “the lack of any cardinal distinction between man and animal – doctrines which I consider true but deadly” (112). He still echoes this sentiment thirteen years later in the *Genealogy of Morals* when he remarks that “all science... is nowadays seeking to talk man out of his former self-respect as though this were nothing but a bizarre piece of self-conceit” and implies that this does not “work against the ascetic ideal”, the overarching life-negating, pessimistic evaluative standard that has been governing humanity for centuries and with which modern science has formed a nihilistic alliance (GM III §25).

In the late 1870s *Human All Too Human*, Nietzsche also argues that objective knowledge is life-undermining – “the tree of knowledge is not that of life” (HAH 3 § 109) – since “the illogical is necessary for human beings” (HAH 1 §31). He returns to this point in the late (1887) addition to the *Gay Science* when he suggests that insofar as organic life requires “semblance, i.e., error, deception, simulation, blinding, self-blinding”, the “will to truth” might be hostile to our organic life-conditions: “Will to truth – that could be a hidden will to death” (GS V §344). Accordingly, he urges us to regard the *value* of a theoretical judgment or a moral command as independent from its *truth*, just like the value of a medication for a person is “completely independent” of whether the person has true or false medical beliefs (GS V §345) – consider here the salutary placebo effect. *Beyond Good and Evil* again raises “the problem regarding the value of truth” and of the will to truth (BGE I §1). Nietzsche now explicitly denies that truth has the unconditional value which philosophers typically ascribe to it: since we are “conceding untruth as a life-condition”, “the falseness of a judgment is for us not yet an objection against a judgment... the question is to what extent” the judgment “is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating” (BGE I §4). In the *Genealogy of Morals*, he argues that in our modern condition we face “a new problem: that

concerning the value of truth" (GM III §24). This problem is ignored by modern science whose foundation is its "overestimation of truth", the olden metaphysical "faith" that truth cannot be assessed or criticized (GM III §25). Accordingly, he praises those ultimate free spirits who are open-minded enough to question whether and to what extent one should really want to seek knowledge and truth (GM III §24).

Nietzsche's concerns here relate both to the *content* of the propositions that are (supposedly) known as true and to the psychological *mode or spirit* of knowledge – and truth-seeking. Regarding the former issue, Nietzsche's views on why the relevant truths are life-undermining shift over time. In early writings such as the *Birth of Tragedy*, he is still inspired by Schopenhauerian pessimism: he traces our deepest yet most unbearable knowledge to the insight that our sense of individual personhood is an illusion since an undifferentiated, insatiable, purposelessly striving will constitutes the essence of reality. When he discards this metaphysical worldview in *Human All Too Human*, he takes the knowledge poisoning the tree of life to disclose that the beliefs which our species needs to survive are unreasonable. This includes the beliefs in logic, substances, causes, generic and diachronic identities, free will, and moral objectivity. This point persists in his later writings, but here Nietzsche specifies more clearly the dire consequences of the knowledge that our most fundamental theoretical and practical attitudes ultimately spring from non-rational, immoral origins: this genealogical knowledge contributes to the realization that our basic epistemic and moral goals are vain and unsatisfiable in this world.³⁶ This realization, in turn, leads to the nihilistic-pessimistic view that our lives and the world we live in have no real point or value.

Regarding the spirit of knowledge – and truth-seeking, Nietzsche argues that a commitment to be objective at any cost and to value knowledge and truth unconditionally for their own sake conflicts with the basic needs of organic human life which seeks interpretation, invention, and simplification, strong action-carrying conviction rather than a cautious, scrupulous, or skeptical suspension of full belief. Since "the cultivation of the scientific spirit" requires that one permits "oneself no more convictions" (GS V §344) and demands that we resist or even eradicate our natural needs for subjective interpretation, invention, simplification etc., Nietzsche deems this scientific spirit deeply unnatural, ascetic, and hostile to our vital life forces: it "expresses the asceticism of virtue, quite as efficiently as does any repudiation of the

³⁶ On the central role this realization plays in Nietzsche's conception of modern pessimism and nihilism "as despair", see the helpful discussion in Reginster 2006:21-49.

senses (it is at bottom only a *modus* of that repudiation)” (GM III §24). Accordingly, the scientific mindset, like all the other manifestations of the ascetic ideal (such as Christian faith or Buddhist practices) presupposes, indeed derives from “a certain impoverishment of life”: a weakened, exhausted, dispassionate psycho-physiological condition where “the affects have become cool” and where one puts “the dialectic in place of the instinct” (GM III §25). The latter remark signals the revival in Nietzsche’s later works of a contrast which was already a centerpiece of the *Birth of Tragedy*, and which he now calls the “entire, genuine antagonism”: art versus science, Homer versus Socrates and Plato, “the will to deception” and fabrication which seeks the beautifying, life-affirming reinterpretation of reality (and which is thereby fundamentally opposed to the nihilistic, life-smearing ascetic ideal) versus the will to truth and objective knowledge (GM III § 25).

In Nietzsche’s narrative, the Socratic turn towards consciousness, reason, and dialectic, “the hypertrophy of the logical” (TI, *The Problem of Socrates* §4), stems from a physiological condition he calls “decadence”. In this condition, the strong, active passions and instincts whose unconscious rule over the human organism once drove our progressive-creative development and enthusiastic life-affirmation have become unhinged, decentered, disorganized, and chaotic. Individually, they lack any internal restraint and seek absolute satisfaction at all costs. Collectively, they have segregated from the cohesive psycho-physical union that constitutes a healthy person; they work fiercely against each other in recurring antagonistic psycho-physical processes which sap the decadent organism’s vital forces and thereby create the constant sense of depletion, exhaustion, and feeling overwhelmed that is so characteristic of the modern condition. Hence, decadent persons must regard their most vital passions as enemies: they must fear these life-forces and their unconscious workings, must seek to suppress and (as far as possible) eradicate them via a new tyranny of conscious reasoning. “Rationality was then guessed to be the savior... The fanaticism with which all of Greek thought threw itself on rationality reveals that there was a crisis: people were in danger, they had only option: be destroyed or – be absurdly rational...” (TI, *The Problem of Socrates* §10).

How does this affect the dispute between Nietzsche and Kant? As we saw, Kant argues that anyone who partakes in a truth-oriented thought process must place a robust trust in our purely rational capacities. Thus, for Kant Nietzsche’s objections against the project of rational self-critique fail since they incur a commitment to the cognitive authority and standards of pure reason which they purport to deny or doubt. However, Nietzsche emphatically disavows a preoccupation with rationality, truth, and knowledge:

in his view, dispositions such as valuing truth over everything else, favoring dialectical procedures of giving and weighing reasons or arguments, and seeking out objective knowledge for its own sake betray a deeply problematic mindset. This mindset results from and manifests an impoverished psycho-physical life form which involves thinned, frigid passions as well as the corresponding loss of any deeper sense of meaning, orientation, and purpose. Due to this loss, we have no real confidence that or why human life is worth living and should continue to be lived when it involves so much suffering, disappointment, loss, and finitude. In particular, we cannot give any satisfying answer to the question of why we should live *for the sake of truth and knowledge*, or what makes truth and knowledge categorically more valuable than falsehood, (self-)deception, and illusion. In short, for Nietzsche the truth – and reason-oriented mindset that Kant sees as the common ground of all philosophy and science is just one prominent expression of our decadent human condition, a specific incarnation of the dangerous asceticism and nihilism which is characteristic of our decaying modern age. On this basis, he would hold that the Kantian rejoinder has no force against his overall viewpoint.

One might object that Nietzsche cannot plausibly avoid the Kantian rejoinder via his demotion of the value of knowledge. To motivate this demotion, Nietzsche assumes that we *can* know certain “terrible” truths (*Ecce Homo, Why I am a Destiny* §1) about our existence. Here he seems to be abandoning the skepticism about the possibility of knowledge that fueled his initial objections against the Kantian enterprise.

But this objection overlooks two crucial points. First, the cognitive skepticism Nietzsche endorsed after the *Birth of Tragedy* and his associated severe doubts about our capacity to know the true character of reality (partly) constitute the “terrible” truth (*Ecce Homo, Why I am a Destiny* §1) of our condition: this terrible truth includes the recognition that modern humans laboring under the will to truth seem incapable of realizing their most important (namely, epistemic) aims. Thus, Nietzsche’s demotion of the value of truth and knowledge incorporates rather than replaces his skepticism about the possibility of (certain kinds of) knowledge. Second, Nietzsche’s project of demoting the value of knowledge does not strictly need to assume actual knowledge: this project may proceed just by raising the very uncomfortable suspicion that the relevant “terrible” ideas might be true. Moreover, as we saw, his demotion is motivated not just by his appeal to the known terrible content of certain propositions, but also and crucially by worries about the (dispassionate, depersonalized, emaciated) mindset of those who labor under the will to truth and knowledge.

One might insist that Nietzsche's strategy does not effectively address Kant's reply to his initial objections. Kantians might argue that if Nietzsche counters this reply by demoting the value of rationality, truth, and knowledge, then his initial objections against their project lose their force: if Nietzsche abandons the game of rational argumentation, truth – and knowledge-seeking, then he cannot take his ruminations about circularity and naturalistically determined cognition to yield *arguments* that expose *rational* flaws in the Kantian project. And, if Nietzsche's objections are not intended as arguments which occur within a rational debate between participants who share a commitment to objective truth and knowledge, then these objections cannot undermine the rational credentials of the Kantian project. They fail to provide *good reasons* for denying that we can successfully conduct epistemic self-critique.

This dismissal of Nietzsche's position would be too quick. Nietzsche does not himself abandon, or propose that others should abandon, truth – and knowledge-seeking altogether. He denies only that truth and knowledge are to be viewed as absolutely, intrinsically (rather than instrumentally) valuable and, as such, must always be pursued unconditionally at all costs. What he deems problematic is not the pursuit of truth and knowledge *per se* but, rather, a mindset where adopting a maximally objective, dispassionate stance of truth – and knowledge-seeking has become the *ultima ratio*, a second (or third) nature. Hence, Nietzsche can take his objections against the Kantian project to function *as* reasons that disclose rational flaws in this project, without thereby conceding that rational standards of argumentation, truth – and knowledge-seeking have absolute authority. For instance, he can offer his circularity argument as a reason against the intellectual cogency of the Kantian project while also denying that rational standards of non-circularity or coherence have supreme authority over, or impose ultimately decisive constraints upon, our projects and attitudes. “The price of fertility” (i.e., of life-affirming creativity and inventiveness) “is to be rich in contradictions” (TI, *Morality as Anti-Naturalness* §3).

One might still protest: if Nietzsche admits that the rational standards which he uses in his arguments against the Kantian project are not ultimately decisive or authoritative, must he not also concede that his arguments cannot decisively tell against the Kantian project? Does it not, then, follow after all that Kantians are free to dismiss these arguments as irrelevant? But Nietzsche's point is that the relevant rational standards and arguments *are* ultimately decisive *in his interlocutors' eyes* – given *their* commitment to the unconditional value of rationality, objectivity, truth and knowledge, Kantians must regard the circularity or incoherence of their quest for epistemic self-cognition as a decisive problem. This, Nietzsche might hold,

is sufficient to break in his favor the dialectic stalemate over the circularity argument that arises when the two sides of the debate accuse each other of incoherence (cf. II.1).

This reveals an important characteristic of Nietzsche's philosophical style: he frequently shifts between various perspectives or contexts relative to which certain questions, problems, or arguments have a force that they might lack in other contexts, relative to other viewpoints that involve different commitments. In particular, he sometimes adopts or simulates the standpoint of those who are absolutely committed to truth – and knowledge-seeking. This is an easy thing for him to do: he knows the allure and pitfalls of this standpoint inside out since it used to be his own perspective.³⁷ We can understand his post-will to truth strategy in raising objections like the circularity argument as a way of engaging with those who are still fully in the grip of the will to truth: Nietzsche addresses truth – and knowledge-fanatics, “these last idealists of cognition” (GMS III §24), on their own ground and in their own terms, through rational considerations that they must take seriously given their absolute deference to standards of intellectual rigor. Through arguments that undermine their cognitive pursuits by suggesting that these pursuits are flawed even relative to their

³⁷ Nietzsche arguably exemplified the absolute will to truth when he had internalized the rigorous standards of classical philology, and especially during the transitional, starkly ‘positivistic’, even anti-aestheticist period of the late 1870s and early 1880s, after he had severed his ties with the romantically enraptured Wagner-Schopenhauer worldview. This is a plausible reference point for his remark in GMS III §24 that “I know this” (i.e., the “heroic” commitment to truth and “intellectual cleanliness” to be found in “pale atheists, antichrists, immoralists, nihilists”) “perhaps too far at close range”. Kaufman (2000:587) argues that this mindset “seems remote from Nietzsche’s own spirit”. This may be correct with regards to the late 1880s Nietzsche, but Nietzsche’s late 1870s/early 1880s spirit can plausibly be seen as committed to intellectual cleanliness and a heroic cognitive asceticism that prefers truth over life-preserving (e.g., Wagnerian) illusion. One might suggest that Nietzsche’s remark (“I know this...too far at close range”) refers not to himself but to his former circle of philological scholars. But Nietzsche would not credit these scholars with heroic cognitive idealism: he would not count them among those “rare, noble, and atypical cases” where people strive for truth and knowledge from the genuine will for truth *qua* “passion, love and ardor” for objective truth and knowledge (GMS III §23). For Nietzsche, these scholars characteristically lack “a goal, a will, an ideal, passion of the great faith” and instead “exhibit “unreflective diligence, heads smoking night and day” (GMS III §23). They are engaged in “mechanical activity” aimed at suppressing their deep-seated discontent. This is compatible with the further plausible supposition that most of these scholars (just like academic philosophers) are driven by “a host of little, very human impulses” such as “the motive of breadwinning” or “vanity” (*Schopenhauer as Educator* §6).

internal intellectual standards, such as the logical norm of coherence, he seeks (among other things) to gradually alienate them from these pursuits and to *change* their present commitments: namely, to unsettle their cognitive idealism, to shatter their mindset of seeking objective truth and knowledge above all else. He intends to sway these idealists of cognition – which, he suspects, form a considerable portion of his readership³⁸ – towards a realignment of their priorities, an intellectual reorientation. This reorientation might involve gradually breaking away from their (stifling, ascetic) obsession with critical self-scrutiny and “intellectual cleanliness” (GMS III §24), instead focusing their remaining or replenished energies on healthier, more important aspirations.

It is less clear how this strategy bears on Nietzsche’s naturalistic objection to the Kantian project. According to the Kantian response examined in section 3, this objection fails because it is based upon a naturalistic theory of human cognition which purports to undermine and yet employs the a priori rational-cognitive standards that the Kantian pursuit of rational self-critique also takes for granted. Whether and how Nietzsche can hold on to his naturalistic demotion of our higher intellectual faculties and categorical concepts despite the fact that his naturalistic account seems to employ those faculties and concepts (such as ‘causality’) is, in my estimation, one of the hardest questions about Nietzsche’s philosophy. I cannot fruitfully pursue this question here. But even if it turns out that Nietzsche’s naturalistic account is self-undermining (in the way suggested in section 3), there might still be a way for him to use this account as an argumentative resource in his second, naturalistic objection to the Kantian project.

Nietzsche might conceive his overall stance roughly as follows. Due to his demotion of the value of truth, knowledge, and rationality, he need not, at the end of day, really care about whether his naturalistic claims about human cognition are rationally defensible as objective-knowledge claims. When he raises his naturalistic objection, he is (if only temporarily) adopting the perspective of those who accept that one must not make any

³⁸ Given his aforementioned point that Kant’s pursuit of allegedly rational self-critique is driven by personal (religious-moral) interests rather than by an unbiased commitment to objective truth, Nietzsche might deny that Kant is really at bottom a pure “idealist of cognition” or truly committed to “intellectual cleanliness” (cf. Clark 1990:175). But this does not change the fact that he would expect among his readers many *Kantians*, or thinkers inspired by Kant, who exhibit more intellectual cleanliness than Kant did and who have taken Kant’s professed commitment to dispassionate rational self-scrutiny to the next ascetic level (cf. Clark 1990:237-239).

assertions unless they are rationally defensible as claims to objective knowledge and truth. This includes Kantian thinkers who sincerely engage in rational self-critique. Nietzsche can insist that from within this perspective, one must concede that his naturalistic argument undermines the project of rational self-critique. This is because the naturalistic view of human cognition shows that our conscious reasoning lacks the sort of intellectual autonomy (*qua* independence from subjective, non-rational drives) which one must attribute to oneself when one seeks to establish unbiased claims about our cognitive powers and limits. Suppose: (I) The debunking naturalistic view of human cognition is based on strong empirical evidence (e.g., it is backed by recent findings in evolutionary biology or cognitive psychology³⁹), and it makes valid use of intellectual (e.g., logical and categorial) concepts and forms of inference that must be used in any scientific theory. (II) The naturalistic theory undermines the objective rational validity of those intellectual concepts and forms of inference. The conjunction of (I)-(II) creates a bad quandary for those who seek rational, objectively true beliefs about human (self-)cognition. But it does not necessarily yield a problematic predicament for Nietzsche or anyone else who is ready to abandon the ascetic-nihilistic will to objective truth, knowledge, and rational defensibility as the ultimate arbiter of what attitudes we should adopt about ourselves and the world.

One might raise a further worry about Nietzsche's view. Crucial to this view (as I have reconstructed it) is the point that the (e.g., Kantian) commitment to critical (self-)scrutiny, objectivity, and truth ultimately leads to a deep-seated weariness and disgust with life. But, one might argue, for this point to have any force Nietzsche must present it as a good reason for abandoning the (unconditional) will to truth, which requires him to make a claim to *normative-practical knowledge*. Thus, he accepts after all the (e.g., Kantian) commitment to practical knowledge and truth which he allegedly seeks to undermine.

³⁹ Note here Darwin's "horrid doubt" about "whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy" (F. Darwin 1887: 1:315-316). In more recent evolutionary-based cognitive psychology, claims similar to Nietzsche's naturalistic views on human cognition can be found in Stich 1990 and in Churchland: "The principle chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive... Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost... a fancier style of representing is advantageous *so long as it is geared to the organism's way of life and enhances the organism's chances of survival*" (Churchland 1987:543).

However, this worry can be defused by noting that Nietzsche's practical prescriptions make sense, within his framework, even though or better *precisely because* they do not aspire to the kind of objective, universal normative-practical knowledge which he thinks we should stop pursuing. I cannot examine here precisely what kind of status Nietzsche might assign to his own value claims or normative-practical prescriptions while abandoning their claim to objective-universal validity.⁴⁰ But it is worth noting that Nietzsche deliberately addresses a *select* audience of people who, he thinks, either already to some extent share or at least are prone to be made to share his concerns about modern self-disgust and nihilism, and who thus have the requisite psychological proclivities and sensibilities to care about strategies for avoiding (or overcoming) this nihilism. The fact that Nietzsche's claims about what there is good reason (not) to do are subjective or relative to the presence of certain sensibilities does not render his practical judgments pointless, irrelevant, or less than 'genuine.' Quite the contrary: the subjectivity and relativity of Nietzsche's own value-pronouncements is completely of a piece with his view that his envisaged "philosophers of the future", while still attached to "their truths", "will certainly not be dogmatists" or universalists of the Kantian type precisely because that would be "contrary to their pride and...taste": an integral feature of their "noble" concerns and aspirations is that these are designed to engage only a select minority of creative spirits, are thus not meant to be shared by everyone (BGE II, §43).

V. Conclusion

A centerpiece of Kant's mature philosophy is the idea that before trying to cognize truths about external (especially transcendent) objects, human reason must first engage in an internal self-critique which sets fixed, non-arbitrary boundaries for human cognition by determining in a principled manner, with objective certainty, which sorts of truth we can and cannot know. This paper has examined how Kant's approach fares in light of Nietzsche's claim that the Kantian project is misguided. I suggested that Nietzsche raises two separate objections: first, he argues that the Kantian approach is viciously circular; second, he argues on naturalistic grounds that we lack the cognitive powers for purely rational self-critique which the Kantian project presupposes. I showed that Kant can give a powerful rejoinder by arguing that Nietzsche's objections themselves presuppose the

⁴⁰ For discussion of this issue (and possible options for Nietzsche), see, e.g., Huddleston 2014; Hussain 2007; Reginster 2006.

cognitive powers and authority of pure reason. I then brought out a further complication: Nietzsche does not condone the “ascetic” mindset that values “intellectual cleanliness”, rationality, truth – and knowledge-seeking above all else. This stance may allow Nietzsche to sidestep Kant’s rejoinder because it enables him to remain ultimately agnostic or non-committal about whether the cognitive resources that he employs in his objections are truth-apt or conducive to acquiring objective knowledge. There remains, however, a question about whether this stance is consistent with the naturalistic pronouncements that Nietzsche uses against the Kantian view (and more generally in his philosophy, e.g., in his genealogical inquiries); or, if Nietzsche’s overall view here turns out to be inconsistent, whether he might get away with saying that a lack of consistency is simply not a major problem for him (since a concern with consistency betrays an ongoing commitment to ascetic-nihilistic “intellectual cleanliness”).

Does Kant or Nietzsche have the final upper hand in this debate? To my mind, this is not the most fruitful question to ask here. Instead, I suggest that the debate I have traced is of central interest in part because it gives vivid expression to two different ways of philosophizing, which reflect different views about what is at stake in philosophical inquiry.

For Kant, a properly enlightened philosophy aims to scrutinize both ordinary and philosophical (especially metaphysical) claims to truth and knowledge. Since judgments which lay claim to objective truth demand assent from other judging subjects in a community of rational thinkers, philosophy is at bottom an attempt to assess whether various types of judgments have the kind of universal, intersubjective validity which makes them justifiable to others. This requires that we reflect on the structure and representational contents of our shared cognitive capacities. Through epistemic self-reflection, we can establish what sorts of claims human cognizers can and cannot know to be true or false, and we can also vindicate certain claims that fail to yield objective knowledge: such claims can still be rationally justifiable to others, e.g., as rational faith.

For Nietzsche, philosophy should not be conceived primarily as critical reflection on the epistemic credentials of our judgments. He denies that the tribunal of pure universal reason must be accepted as the prime arbiter of our attitudes (beliefs, volitions, etc.), or that philosophers should (continue to) view rational justifiability to others as the fundamental criterion for deeming our attitudes acceptable. For Nietzsche, the olden philosophical preoccupation with truth, knowledge, or rational justifiability to others is (if it ever was) no longer viable, i.e., *liveable* in our modern human condition after the irredeemable “death of God” and the resulting, ever-increasing threat of nihilism and pessimism that hits modern subjects in a new guise:

namely, as an ever-growing weariness of and disgust with humanity. In our modern context, the will to truth, rationality, and universal justifiability emerges as a problem, a symptom of rather than a solution to our deepest predicaments. Hence, philosophy cannot rest on its wilting laurels as a stalwart defender of hollow cognitive ideals: philosophers are now charged with the task to create new ideals and values (see, e.g., BGE VI, §210-213). The appeal of these new values rests on their capacity to wake up, enliven, and inspire those select few who still possess inner strength and genius, so that they might devise new forms of life and creative output which make us admire humanity (and thereby escape the threat of nihilism) once again. Due to their inherently selective purpose and character, these values are by design *not* objectively valid or universally acceptable for every 'rational' subject.

The extent to which one is inclined to side with Kant or Nietzsche in this debate may hinge on whether one is drawn more to the Kantian or the Nietzschean model of philosophizing. How is one to decide between these two models? Can or should it be a *rational* decision? Such questions do not get us very far because they just lead us back again to the very dichotomy which they seek to resolve. Kantians will say that we should adopt their model because it is supported by compelling reasons that apply to everyone who engages in a rational debate and who thereby incurs a commitment to the values of universal justifiability, objectivity, and truth, i.e., to regard intersubjectively shareable reasons as the only valid basis for belief and action. Nietzscheans will hold that human thought, including philosophical thought (including Kantian thought bent on justifying moralistic, theistic dogmas), is not based on objective, purely rational considerations; they will add that the continued (unconditional) attachment to the "ascetic" values of universal justifiability, objectivity, and truth is a deep problem that afflicts humanity in its modern depleted, disoriented, pessimistic, and nihilistic condition since "life wants deception, it lives from deception" including self-deception (added Preface to *Human, All Too Human* §1).

Thus, a survey of the dialectic between Kant and Nietzsche seems to reveal that there can be no resolution that would be independent of their respective philosophical framework.⁴¹ Hence, I abstain from a verdict about who 'wins' the debate over the possibility of rational self-critique. In my view, a more important lesson of this essay is that it reveals one crucial

⁴¹ This might be interpreted as support for Nietzsche's 'meta-philosophical' framework, because his perspectivism and his related view that philosophical arguments have or lack weight relative to the desiderative forces of one's readership explain why the dialectic presented here cannot be resolved in a non-question-begging manner.

benefit of engaging with the history of philosophy. Tracing the intricacies, twists, and turns of central debates among great philosophers can make us see what is ultimately at stake for these thinkers, while also allowing or forcing us to confront the question of what *our* stakes are: what *we* see as the basic aspiration of our philosophical activity, other than doing what it takes to keep collecting that monthly paycheck, getting closer to the next petty promotion, and satisfying our vanity by racking up publications in ‘top journals’.⁴²

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Quotations from Nietzsche’s published works cite the book numbers and paragraphs of the *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Eds. G. Colli and M. Montinari. Translations are my own. I have used the following abbreviations: BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*; GM = *Genealogy of Morals*; GS = *The Gay Science*; HAH = *Human, All Too Human*; TI = *Twilight of Idols*.

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⁴² A version of this paper was presented at the NAKS Southern Study Group at UNC Wilmington in April 2022. I am grateful to the audience for stimulating questions and comments, and especially to Olga Lenczewska for organizing a wonderful conference. For very helpful feedback on earlier drafts, I am indebted to Stephanie Basakis, Phil Bold, and Bernard Reginster.

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