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The Will to Power as Knowledge: An Exegesis of
Nietzsche's Remarks on Epistemology
and Language — Part II

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This paper is the second installment of a three-part series providing an exegesis of Nietzsche's remarks on language and epistemology. Part I, published separately, contains the following sections: (1) Nietzsche's Moral Foundation; (2) The Will to Power and Epistemological Motivations; (3) Metaphysical Need; and (4) Perspectivism and the Text Analogy. Part II, presented here, contains the following sections: (5) Evaluating Interpretations; and (6) The Assumptions of Logic. Part III, also published separately, contains the following sections: (7) Language; (8) Systems and the Historical Approach; and (9) Beyond Scepticism. Part III also includes a full bibliography. Section numbers and references are numbered consecutively throughout the entire series.

(5) Evaluating Interpretations

Since interpretations necessarily involve error, the question must be asked: why not simply refrain from making interpretations altogether? In other words, why not simply adopt a nihilist perspective which holds all attempts to understand and evaluate the world in contempt? The temptation here is to think that by never holding any opinions or beliefs about anything, it may be possible to be forever beyond criticism. Would a nihilist not always be consistent and never in error? On the other hand, would such a person still be a human being who is actively engaged in life? "Perhaps," Nietzsche writes, ". . . we should make no judgments at all; if one could only live without making estimations, without having likes and dislikes!"³⁷

If people must make judgments, and if Nietzsche's observation that "the only experiences are moral experiences, even in the domain of sense-perceptions"³⁸ is accurate, then which judgments in Nietzsche's view are worthy of consideration and which are not? Again, the problem is not with establishing epistemological certainty, but rather with evaluating the moral desirability of any given judgment.³⁹ Nietzsche differentiated between good and bad judgments, and as might be expected, his own moral biases in the matter are quite evident.

A sketch in *The Will to Power* presents one type of approach to the problem of interpretation which Nietzsche undoubtedly disapproved of. The passage is quoted here in its original, unpolished form:

"Thinking" in primitive conditions (pre-organic) is the crystallization of forms, as in the case of crystal. — In *our* thought, the essential feature is fitting new material into old schemas (= Procrustes' bed), *making* equal what is new.⁴⁰

When people have become accustomed to thinking in a certain way, they usually find it much easier to see new data and new observations as a confirmation of their former interpretations of the world. Consequently, such persons are never really open to the full impact that new observations and experiences can have.

Consider, as an example, the problem in astronomy known as Plato's problem. The ancient Greeks observed that the five planets known in their time moved through the heavens in a manner which was quite contrary to their notions about the manner in which a planet *should* move. In place of the circular motion which the Greeks expected, the naked eye revealed that the planets moved with retrograde motion. A planet would proceed in its normal direction, then stop and reverse its direction, stop again and resume its original direction of travel. The rational Greeks assumed that the motion of planets must be circular, and to explain the planets' erratic motion it was necessary for them to draw up a number of extremely complicated charts which described the paths on which planets travel. The final system, known as the homocentric sphere system, was worked out in detail by Eudoxus around 370 B.C. and involved the construction of

intersecting circular paths which rotated on separate axes.

The Greeks' bias toward circular motion (along with their mistaken idea that the earth was stationary) forced them to fit empirical data into a schema which was ultimately proven to be inadequate. In cases such as these Nietzsche would undoubtedly endorse the principle of Occam's razor and suggest that explanations which account for all the data in the simplest fashion are best. Furthermore, Nietzsche would contend that experience should be the dictator of thought, rather than the reverse. One's thoughts become prejudices when they attempt to align experiences according to preexisting modes of thought.

Nietzsche's criticism was vehement, as might be expected, against the metaphysicians whose fragmentary interpretations of the world were believed to be so comprehensive that opposing data was ignored or distorted in the interests of assimilation. Consider this passage from *The Wanderer and His Shadow*:

He who has interpreted a passage in an author "more profoundly" than was intended, has not interpreted the author but has obscured him. Our metaphysicians are in the same relation, or even in a worse relation, to the text of Nature. For, to apply their profound interpretations, they often alter the text to suit their purpose — or, in other words, corrupt the text.⁴¹

The interpretations of metaphysics are often too rigid to be able to handle the rich and diverse experiences which people have in the world.

According to Nietzsche, the very nature of the world can be changed if people merely look at it with their biases. A person who considers the world to be ultimately good will tend to see evil perhaps as an ultimate good, or at least as a means to a greater good. The opposite is also possible, of course. To use Nietzsche's own example, "The Christian resolution to find the world ugly and bad, has made the world ugly and bad."⁴² Elsewhere Nietzsche elaborates:

It is because for thousands of years we have looked into the world with moral, aesthetic, and religious pretensions . . . that this world has

gradually *become* so marvellously motley, terrible . . . it has acquired colour — but we were the colourists. . . .⁴³

One is reminded here of a similar situation written about by Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. An angel comes to Blake, so the story goes, and pities him because the angel is confident that Blake is preparing himself through his deeds for nothing less than eternal damnation. Blake asks the angel to show him his fate and the angel takes him directly to hell, a truly miserable and despicable place. As soon as the angel departs, however, leaving Blake to the suffering which the angel is confident Blake must endure, Blake finds himself sitting beside a river in the moonlight listening to a man with a harp. When Blake returns to the angel, he explains that he was able to escape the hell which the angel had conjured up for him simply because the vision was merely a product of the angel's metaphysics. Since Blake did not share this metaphysic, he was not bound by it; he was free to see hell, in this case, as a very pleasant place, complete with the harps of heaven.

Nietzsche might say that Blake's tale provides an excellent example of how the world can be "coloured" by what were, for Nietzsche, "life-denying" interpretations of the universe. Nietzsche's own writings also seem to suggest more than just the notion that how people think about something determines how it is for *them*. There is also the insinuation that the world has become a bad place to live in not just for Christians but for *everyone* because of Christianity's insistent belief in original sin and its preference for the otherworldly. Whether such beliefs are a necessary part of the Christian worldview can be debated, of course, but in Nietzsche's view they represent the historical influence of Christianity on Western thought and are something to be overcome.

Since interpretations cannot be avoided, however, and since Nietzsche obviously held that certain types of interpretations could be not only worthless but also harmful, what criteria could Nietzsche use to evaluate which interpretations are worthy of adoption and which are not? As Nietzsche writes, "We can comprehend only a world that we ourselves have made."⁴⁴ The creative aspect of epistemology is emphasized here; for

Nietzsche, all “truth” is a product of the mind, a fiction which the mind creates in order to allow the organism to survive. In this sense, what is usually considered “truth” is instead error. Nietzsche writes,

“Truth” is . . . not something . . . that might be found or discovered — but something which must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end — introducing truth, as a *processus in infinitum*, an active determining — not a becoming-conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined. It is a word for the “will to power.”⁴⁵

Truth can never be static, then; it must constantly adapt itself to life.

Thus, those interpretations which are life-affirming are of the highest value, even if they must be changed occasionally and never under any circumstances be regarded with total reverence. “To impose upon becoming the character of being,” Nietzsche writes, “that is the supreme will to power.”⁴⁶ The will to power can be misused if people’s interpretations of the world merely offer them security and a shelter from “becoming.” But the supreme manifestation of the will to power with regard to interpretations occurs when people are able to create their own truths — the truths by which they will live — and still see them as ultimately erroneous falsehoods which are merely a means to an end, namely, the conquering and mastering of life with all that it brings, both good and evil, pain and pleasure.

(6) **The Assumptions of Logic**

The ancient Greeks opened the pages of the history of Western philosophy with their famous problem of “the one and the many,” and it seems as if philosophers have been wrestling with this problem in one form or another ever since. Modern philosophers, of course, do not define the problem in the same terms used by the Greeks, but perhaps behind the original dilemma is a metaphor for certain fundamental attitudes in philosophy. Nietzsche would undoubtedly be sympathetic to William James’ identification of tender-minded thinkers with the tendency toward monism and tough-minded thinkers with the tendency towards pluralism.

And if James' distinctions indeed hold up, Nietzsche must without reservation be linked with the tough-minded. As was pointed out in the previous section on metaphysical need,⁴⁷ Nietzsche leaned towards a Heraclitean view of the world. The ability to accept diversity, multiplicity, and change is essential for the person of power.

Logic, for Nietzsche, was one of the greatest tools which humankind had ever devised in its attempt to overcome multiplicity and change. The person who perceives the world through the schemas of logic tends to see similarities where there are differences, unity where there is diversity, essences where there is nothing but fluctuating matter. "“Truth,”" Nietzsche states, "is the will to be master over the multiplicity of sensations: — to classify phenomena into definite categories."⁴⁸ As might be expected, Nietzsche's approach to logic was more concerned with psychological motives than it was with establishing theorems or proofs of validity.

In a section of *The Will to Power*, entitled "Origin of Reason and Logic,"⁴⁹ Nietzsche writes,

One should not understand this compulsion to construct concepts, species, forms, purposes, laws ("a world of identical cases") as if they enabled us to fix the *real world*; but as a compulsion to arrange a world for ourselves in which our existence is made possible: — we thereby create a world which is calculable, simplified, comprehensible, etc., for us.⁵⁰

Several of Nietzsche's basic attitudes, which should be familiar by now, come out in this passage: his perspectivism, his philosophical conventionalism (which is similar in many ways to the views of Poincaré), and his hatred of attempts to establish any "real world" beyond appearances. But what is of most concern here is the relationship between what might be called the "will to simplicity" and logic.

It has already been noted that Nietzsche ruled out the possibility of there being any *a priori* knowledge of the world whatsoever.⁵¹ Nietzsche sided with the empiricists in maintaining that even logic has its origin in the senses. In Nietzsche's words, "all our categories of reason are of sensual origin: derived from the empirical world."⁵² The so-called "cat-

egories of reason," it seems, tend to present humans with an extremely simplified view of the world. If the world is indeed complex rather than simple, why are the "categories of reason," which have their origin in the senses, so inaccurate in their depiction of the world?

Nietzsche accepted Kant's notion that the mind is responsible for organizing separate bits of sense impressions into structured patterns, but held that a certain amount of deception was involved in the process. The mind, by unifying sense data, imposes an order on the objects of perception which is not necessarily inherent in the objects themselves. When an object is perceived as a unit, one tends to pass over the many specific details of composition which also comprise the object.

The "will to simplicity," then, is the tendency to see truth in what Nietzsche calls ". . . the most general, the emptiest concepts, the last smoke of evaporating reality. . . ." ⁵³ It was perhaps a reaction against this very type of simplification which led the Romantic poets to adopt Blake's dictum, "To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularities is the Alone Distinction of Merit." ⁵⁴ Nietzsche would undoubtedly regard the Romantics' emphasis on detailed description favorably, even though he tended to be unsympathetic towards the Romantics as a whole. The world, for Nietzsche, must be viewed in all of its complexities and contradictions. The path furthest from wisdom is the path which attempts to resolve these complexities and contradictions into unified wholes. "Everything simple," Nietzsche writes, "is merely imaginary, is not 'true.' But whatever is real, whatever is true, is neither one nor even reducible to one." ⁵⁵

The first assumption which Nietzsche saw as an unacceptable foundation for logic is the idea that objects never change. The law of identity offers an example. To assert that x always equals x is to assume that x will never change. Consider, for example, that we wish to construct a bridge across Heraclitus' river. We measure the width of river R_1 at a point in time T_1 , and find that the width is 50 meters. Upon the basis of this information, we order steel beams which will span 50 meters of water. But when we attempt to begin construction of the bridge at the point in time T_2 , we find that the banks of the river have widened to 55 meters. River R_1 has become, in effect, river R_2 . Nietzsche (and Heraclitus) would contend

that the rivers R_1 and R_2 are the same river in name only. The most that one can say is that river R_1 measured 50 meters at time T_1 and that river R_2 measured 55 meters at time T_2 . A truly descriptive account of the changes in the river would have to give separate labels to the river R_n at each specific point in time T_n (assuming, of course, that time also divides itself into distinct separate points). To speak of the river with the same designation R at all points of time T_n fails to take into account the changes which inevitably take place.

Of course, one might argue for the principle of identity by maintaining that when R_1 becomes R_2 , R_2 is still identical with itself. Formulating the law of identity in this way, however, surely makes it into a vacuous concept which is merely redundant and expresses no great truth about the world. Logic is useful, perhaps, only in dealing with the past, where the element of time is absent and where events can be evaluated within a static framework. It is to this end no doubt that Nietzsche writes,

The principle of identity has behind it the “apparent fact” of things that are the same. A world in a state of becoming could not, in a strict sense, be “comprehended” or “known.”⁵⁶

Knowledge itself, then, would seem to depend upon a never-changing world.

“Logic,” as Nietzsche writes, “handles only formulas for what remains the same.”⁵⁷ The senses themselves do not reveal a world of unified objects, but rather a world of almost overwhelming diversity. But if the chaotic world is to be organized with the elegance of logic, the doctrine of “sameness” must be assumed — further assuming, of course, that it is desirable to synthesize diversities into unities.

Nietzsche would deny, however, that “sameness” is an objective and justifiable concept, immune from the necessary subjective element of judgment:

. . . There is in every judgment the avowal of having encountered an “identical case”: it therefore presupposes comparison with the aid of memory. The judgment does not produce the appearance of an

identical case. Rather it believes it perceives one: it works under the presupposition that identical cases exist. Now, what is that function that must be much older and must have been at work much earlier, that makes cases identical and similar which are in themselves dissimilar? What is that second function, which on the basis of the first, etc. "Whatever arouses the same sensation is the same": but what is it that makes sensations the same, "accepts" them as the same? There could be no judgments at all if a kind of equalization were not practiced within sensations: memory is possible only with a continual emphasizing of what is already familiar, experienced.⁵⁸

The implications of Nietzsche's attitudes on this matter will become more evident in the section on language which follows.

For the present, only Nietzsche's notion that the concept of "sameness" is possible simply because of the faculty of memory needs to be stressed. It is precisely because human memories tend to forget details with the passing of time that people tend to regard sensations which may be quite dissimilar as identical. Furthermore, Nietzsche seems to be suggesting that the operation of the subconscious in making judgments of this sort has not yet been fully explored. The variables which are present in judgment are so diverse and complicated that it is difficult to adequately analyze the actual process which takes place. The overall thrust of Nietzsche's remarks, far from defending the supposed exactitude of logic, tends instead to strip logic of its honored position in philosophy.

Adopting a somewhat historical approach, Nietzsche writes,

Before there is "thought" there must have been "invention"; the *construction* of identical cases, of the appearance of sameness, is more primitive than the *knowledge* of sameness.⁵⁹

In other words, what people now call a "knowledge of sameness" must not be viewed as a form of knowledge which can be supported or verified by actual experience; rather, it is a concept which developed historically, based upon the interpreting powers of the human mind which are capable of constructing identical cases. To elevate the concept to a much higher

status by calling it “knowledge” is to ignore its humbler beginnings.

Using the same historical approach, Nietzsche writes,

From the period of the lower organisms man has inherited the belief that *similar things* exist (this theory is only contradicted by the matured experience of the most advanced science). The primordial belief of everything organic from the beginning is perhaps even this, that all the rest of the world is one and immovable.⁶⁰

Nietzsche traces the development of logic to certain evolutionary principles, betraying, perhaps, a debt to Darwin. The fact, however, that logic evolves and must adapt itself to conditions which humans impose on it, adds one more variable which must be considered when attempting to provide a completely external justification of logic and the concept of “sameness.”

In another passage Nietzsche comes extremely close to Darwin’s principle of the “survival of the fittest” and applies it to the domain of logic:

Where has logic originated in men’s heads? Undoubtedly out of the illogical, the domain of which must originally have been immense. But numberless beings who reasoned otherwise than we do at present, perished; albeit that they may have come nearer to truth than we! Whoever, for example, could not discern with regard to animals dangerous to him, whoever, therefore, deduced too slowly, or was too circumspect in his deductions, had smaller probability of survival than he who in all similar cases immediately divined the equality.⁶¹

One sees in this excerpt an echo of some of Nietzsche’s ideas, discussed previously, which emphasize that “knowledge” is an expression of the will to power. Survival is such a powerful instinct in humans that it necessitates the construction of certain modes of thought to insure that humans can indeed survive.

Logic is one of these necessary constructions. Instead of aiding humans in their quest for truth, as logicians might argue, formal logic is rather the direct outgrowth of more primitive urges in humankind which were not as concerned with truth as they were with the problem of mere survival. To

some extent it might be said that logic, even in its most developed form, is still an expression of the human need to feel that nature can be conquered. Whatever has not been conquered by humans poses the threat of becoming in turn our conquerers.

Nietzsche's observations in regard to the nature of logic, and especially his observations in regard to the concepts of "sameness" and "similarity," enabled him to develop in rather sketchy terms a theory of numbers. Nietzsche states,

The discovery of the laws of number is made upon the ground of the original, already prevailing error, that there are many similar things (but in reality there is nothing similar), at least that there are things (but there is no "thing").⁶²

Imagine, for example that there a group of objects lying on the ground. Someone encounters these objects, notices certain similarities among them, while ignoring varying degrees of difference, and groups them together under the general category "apples." The observation that the objects are "similar" is crucial, since one's natural inclination is not to think of objects in the abstract, at least not to the extent that one would begin counting apples and trees, say, in the same group.

Furthermore, the appearance of the apples is not changing significantly enough to hinder the person from counting them. Each apple, in and of itself, is given the status of being "one." Each apple, then, considered apart from the whole, is given the same status. To assign the number "one" in this case to each of the apples assumes that the objects are identical — at least to the extent that the same number "one" can be applied to any of the apples individually. The number "two" is assigned to a group of apples which are comprised of an original "one" coupled with another original "one," and so on. If there are three apples altogether, labeled A, B, and C respectively, any group of "one" with "one" will yield "two," whether the combination be A-B, A-C, or B-C, since each of the component parts are thought to be identical. The principle of identity, it would seem then, is essential to any theory of numbers.

Nietzsche further observed that a theory of numbers depends upon the

assumption that there are in fact “things.” Apples are relatively easy to count because their form changes slowly enough to enable them to be counted, but who would attempt to count, for example, the drops of water which make up a river? In a body of water, the concept of each drop comprising a “thing” is blurred. Furthermore, the relationship between the individual drops is continually fluctuating to the point that even in a beaker of water formed by dropping individual drops of water into it, the drops extracted from it later with a dropper would undoubtedly not be the same drops which originally went into the beaker. English grammar recognizes this conceptual difference by referring to terms such as *water* as uncountable nouns and terms such as *apple* as countable nouns — a feature, it should be noted, which is not shared by all natural languages, some of which make no such distinction.

Nietzsche tended to view all objects within a similar framework. The element of time often prevents one from observing the essential transitoriness of all objects. A person may cut down a tree and make a chair out of it by placing individual pieces of wood in certain relationships with one another. But with the passing of time these relationships will inevitably disintegrate and the separate parts will form themselves into new relationships, as when an old chair is eventually cut up into firewood and burned, for example. Whereas Plato emphasized the unchanging and eternal nature of the Forms, Nietzsche emphasized the essential transitoriness of all reality. For Nietzsche changes in nature are inevitable and any theory that there are permanent Forms is illusionary. As will be seen, Nietzsche makes a similar critique of Aristotle’s theory of substances.

Rather than defend the notion that “things” are immutable objects, Nietzsche saw the concept of “thingness” as nothing more than a mental construction abstracted from the senses. This power of abstraction is essential to logic. “*Our belief in things,*” Nietzsche writes, “is the precondition of our belief in logic. The ‘A’ of logic is, like the atom, a reconstruction of the thing.”⁶³

It is important to distinguish here between two different uses of the word *thing*. Nietzsche is concerned, to some extent at least, that the ordinary usage of the word *thing* is not replaced by a philosophical usage

of the term which would attempt to denote an abstract metaphysical entity taken as some essential property of all material “objects.” In other words, Nietzsche’s primary motive is to avoid having *things*, the word being used in its ordinary sense, conflated with *Forms*, *substances*, *things-in-themselves*, etc. — terms with explicit philosophical connotations which Nietzsche abhorred.

When Nietzsche appears to be making the absurd claim that there are no “things,” this can only be understood in the sense that he is arguing against the validity of the assertion that there is an immutable substance or essence which is inherent in material reality. Nietzsche’s basic argument is that acute observation reveals that the elements which compose objects never form fixed relationships, but are rather continually in a state of change.

A comparison of Nietzsche’s views with those of several early twentieth-century philosophers may be helpful. Philosophers at the turn of the century were waging a dual battle against idealism on the one hand, and constructivism (a term which might be justly applied to Nietzsche’s views) on the other. Against the claims that “truth” was little more than interpretation, both phenomenology and analytic philosophy became obsessed with the quest for certainty. Husserl and Moore respectively are notable examples of this tendency.

For Husserl, essences could be revealed through the process of eidetic reduction. In this special form of bracketing, one’s attitudes become — so Husserl thought — completely disinterested, to the point that the subjective element of interpretation is eliminated. While Husserl rejected a transcendental realm of reality, he still retained the idea that within phenomena itself there is a separate reality which cannot be perceived through the ordinary ways of sensing. Husserl’s “essences,” then, would undoubtedly be for Nietzsche nothing more than an interpretation of sense data which erroneously assumes the permanent existence of things. Of course, Nietzsche might also criticize Husserl, via his psychological approach, on the grounds that Husserl’s quest for certainty was a remnant of metaphysical need — despite the fact that Husserl was probably as disenchanted with traditional metaphysics as Nietzsche was. Nietzsche

might further argue that no process of perception, including bracketing, will enable one to maintain a completely objective attitude.

In the case of Moore's common sense approach which maintains that there are certain propositions which are true beyond any shadow of a doubt, such as "I know that this is my hand," Nietzsche might argue that such propositions already depend on a set of conventions regarding how words are used, which have been previously agreed to by the speakers of a particular language. What the example of knowing one's hand reveals is not the "truth" about a particular state of affairs, but rather how speakers of English conventionally agree to talk about the world.

Nietzsche would add that such propositions can only assert the existence of a present state of affairs which is subject, of course, to change. The apparent "certainty" of the claim will pass away as quickly as does the state of affairs which the claim purports to describe. Nietzsche would contend that such a "truth" is entirely relative to a specific spatiotemporal situation, hardly the type of absolute truth which philosophers so diligently seek.

Moore's further attempt to posit qualities such as goodness as properties of objects would without question have repulsed Nietzsche. Nietzsche would see in the attempt an uncalled-for return to the medieval tendency in philosophy which divided objects into substances and attributes. Since Nietzsche rejected this dichotomy and further rejected the immutability of objects themselves, the logical outcome of Nietzsche's position would be to deny that any quality can adhere to an object without being subject to the same element of change which affects the object itself. Nietzsche, of course, would be more prone to argue that terms such as *goodness* apply strictly to value judgments and never to the supposedly inherent qualities of an object.

Nietzsche's emphasis on relationships at the expense of any consideration of individual objects is reflected in a syllogism in *The Will to Power*, which may also help to clear up Nietzsche's position in regard to properties:

The properties of a thing are effects on other "things": if one removes

other “things,” then a thing has no properties, i.e., there is no thing without other things, i.e., there is no “thing-in-itself.”⁶⁴

Nietzsche’s final remark on the “thing-in-itself” will be ignored for a moment in order to concentrate on his notion of relationships. Using the traditional epistemological model with the subject as one “thing” and the object as another, the quality goodness would be an attribute of neither, but would rather be found in the relationship between the two objects, in the relative value which one “thing,” in this case a person, would attribute to another.

In another passage Nietzsche writes,

That things possess a constitution in themselves quite apart from interpretation and subjectivity, is a quite idle hypothesis: it presupposes that interpretation and subjectivity are not essential, that a thing free from all relationships would still be a thing.⁶⁵

In other words, any formulation of the concept goodness must be grounded in a relationship between subject and object, a relationship which inevitably involves subjectivity and interpretation. If there were such bits of phenomena as objects existing independently of knowing subjects, and possessing the property of goodness, they would be unknowable “things-in-themselves,” the existence of which Nietzsche denied. The feasibility of this approach, which is strikingly reminiscent of Berkeley’s *esse est percipi*, is debatable, of course, with dilemmas being encountered on either side of the argument.

Aside from the speculation that Nietzsche would want to develop an attack on Moore on these grounds, Nietzsche’s views on relationships and the “thing-in-itself” need to be explored a little more fully. First, an operative definition (a definition withheld, perhaps, for too long) of the term *thing* is needed. Here is Nietzsche’s own definition of the term: “A ‘thing’ is the sum of its effects, synthetically united by a concept, an image.”⁶⁶ Nietzsche is in complete agreement with Kant, it appears, on the notion that separate sense experiences are synthesized by the mind, a process which, for Nietzsche, accounts for the concept of *thingness*. The

error, in Nietzsche's view, is to mistake the concept for a reality.

Once the concept has been established, however, the next error is to ask concerning the "thing," what is it? Nietzsche answers this general question by denying its validity:

The question "what is that?" is an imposition of meaning from some other viewpoint. "Essence," the "essential nature," is something perspective and already presupposes a multiplicity. At the bottom of it there always lies "what is that for *me*?" (for us, for all that lives, etc.). A thing would be defined once all creatures had asked "what is that?" and had answered their question. Supposing one single creature, with its own relationships and perspectives for all things, were missing, then the thing would not yet be "defined." In short: the essence of a thing is only an *opinion* about the "thing." Or rather: "it is considered" is the real "it is," the sole "this is."⁶⁷

Nietzsche relegates Aristotle's "whatness" to the purely conceptual level, maintaining that its corollary "thisness" deserves the exclusive attention of philosophy. From the concept of "whatness" the notion of a "thing-in-itself" is easily established. Instead of viewing objects as changing manifestations of "thisness," the counter-tendency is to question *what* an object is, as if one answer would suffice for each manifestation of the object.

These ever-changing manifestations cannot be ignored. In positing a "thing-in-itself" the object is stripped, in effect, of its "thisness." Nietzsche comments,

The "thing-in-itself" [is] nonsensical. If I remove all the relationships, all the "properties," all the "activities" of a thing, the thing does not remain over; because thingness has only been invented by us owing to the requirements of logic, thus with the aim of defining, communication (to bind together the multiplicity of relationships, properties, activities).⁶⁸

Rather than accept a bifurcation between the "thing" and the "thing-in-itself," Nietzsche opts for a position which emphasizes the interdependency of all objects. Since the relationships between objects are continu-

ally shifting, logic is deprived of much of its exactitude. Nietzsche clearly wanted to avoid establishing an epistemology on mathematical models. Furthermore, since all objects exist solely because they are related to other objects, the “thing-in-itself” does not exist — or so Nietzsche argued.

Superficially Nietzsche’s views appear similar to those expressed by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which also argued that objects only exist in the context of relationships with other objects. Consider, for example, the following excerpt:

Just as we are quite unable to imagine spatial objects outside space or temporal objects outside time, so too there is *no* object that we can imagine excluded from the possibility of combining with others.⁶⁹

Wittgenstein argues, of course, that the world is comprised of facts and not things. But a fact, he insists, is “. . . the existence of states of affairs.”⁷⁰ And a state of affairs is defined by Wittgenstein as a “combination of objects (things).”⁷¹

Although Wittgenstein emphasized the interrelated nature of objects, Nietzsche might have criticized Wittgenstein on the grounds that he tended to see the relationships between objects as essentially static. For Wittgenstein, once the relationships have been established, scientists can examine them at their leisure and record their observations in precise scientific terms. Since, for Nietzsche, these relationships are always in a state of flux, a true description of the world could not be constructed on the logical grounds which Wittgenstein sets forth, but must rather take into account the inevitability of process. To use an analogy, Wittgenstein viewed the world as if it were a still photograph, Nietzsche as if it were a motion picture.

Nietzsche’s investigation into the nature of relationships led him to launch an attack on causalism. Hume had attacked the notion of cause and effect on the grounds that such a relationship could not be perceived by the senses. Nietzsche went one step further and claimed that the cause and effect relationship is indeed not an experiential reality, but is rather a mental construction. Nietzsche tips his hat to Hume first:

... Hume was right; habit (but not only that of the individual!) makes us expect that a certain often-observed occurrence will follow another: nothing more! That which gives the extraordinary firmness to our belief in causality *is not* the great habit of seeing one occurrence following another but our inability to interpret events otherwise than as events caused by intentions.⁷²

The special twist in meaning here would have been quite beyond Hume, however, who had no knowledge, of course, of Kant. For a post-Kantian like Nietzsche, it was relatively easy to believe that causation can be explained not by observing phenomena, but rather by noting the manner in which the mind functions in interpreting data. The principle of cause and effect was for Nietzsche, then, only one of many possible interpretations that could be construed from the same sequence of events.

Although Nietzsche was undoubtedly critical of what has been labeled here the “will to simplicity,” he by no means thought that human beings could function without it. The human mind would be quickly overloaded with irrelevant data in the absence of a process by which sensory input could be sifted and evaluated. While some philosophers may find Nietzsche’s attack on the foundations of logic devastating, Nietzsche himself was ultimately not a pessimist, as the following passage indicates:

... We ... laugh at the way in which precisely science at its best seeks most to keep us in this *simplified*, thoroughly artificial, suitably constructed and suitably falsified world — at the way in which, willy-nilly, it loves error, because being alive, it loves life.⁷³

Once again, error — even in logic — is a consequence of the will to power. The third and final installment of this essay will open with an examination of how this perspective influenced Nietzsche’s views on language.

References

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, p. 47 (§ 32).

³⁸ Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, p. 159 (§ 114).

³⁹ Cf. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 322 (§ 588).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 273 (§ 499).

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, trans. Paul V. Cohn, vol. 7 of

The Will to Power as Knowledge

- The Complete Works*, p. 197 (§ 17).
- ⁴² Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, p. 172 (§ 130).
- ⁴³ Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, p. 29 (§ 16).
- ⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 272 (§ 495).
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 298 (§ 552).
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 330 (§ 617).
- ⁴⁷ In Part I, Section 3 of the present series.
- ⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 280 (§ 517).
- ⁴⁹ The title was supplied, of course, by the posthumous editors of *The Will to Power*.
- ⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 282 (§ 521).
- ⁵¹ See Part I, Section 2 of the present series.
- ⁵² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 270 (§ 488).
- ⁵³ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 481 (“Reason in Philosophy,” § 4).
- ⁵⁴ Cited in David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), p. 9.
- ⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 291 (§ 536).
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 281 (§ 520).
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 280 (§ 517).
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 289 (§ 532).
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 293 (§ 544).
- ⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, pp. 32–33 (§ 18).
- ⁶¹ Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, p. 156 (§ 111).
- ⁶² Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, p. 34 (§ 19).
- ⁶³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 279 (§ 516).
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 302 (§ 557).
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 302–303 (§ 560).
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 296 (§ 551).
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 301–302 (§ 556). Paragraph divisions omitted.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 302 (§ 558).
- ⁶⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1974), p. 6 (§ 2.0121).
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5 (§ 2).
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.* (§ 2.01).
- ⁷² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 295 (§ 550). Emphasis added.
- ⁷³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 225 (§ 24).

