

Nietzsche's Perspectivism Reconsidered

By Peter J. Hansen

Nietzsche is famously both a critic of morality and a teacher of perspectivism, but how do these two things fit together? Does he mean to offer a true account of morality, or an opinion which suits him but might not suit somebody else?

I shall argue that, far from contradicting each other, Nietzsche's perspectivism and his attack on morality go together, and one can fully understand each only in tandem with the other.

In his early writings in particular, Nietzsche articulates beautifully the ineluctable fact that people live in their own worlds, their own natures, their own bodies. "I believe that everyone must have his own individual opinion concerning everything about which an opinion is possible, because he himself is an individual, unique thing." A man must draw "the water up from his own well."¹ But how can a view that develops because it echoes and suits a man's nature be true? An aphorism entitled "Life as the yield of life" reads, "No matter how far a man may extend himself with his knowledge, no matter how objectively he may come to view himself, in the end it can yield to him nothing but his own biography."²

A character in another aphorism says, "Never to be able to see into things out of any other eyes but *these*....What will mankind have come to know at the end of all their knowledge?-- their organs!" His interlocutor responds: "*Reason* is attacking you! But tomorrow you will be

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 286.

² Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, 513.

again in the midst of knowledge and therewith also in the midst of unreason, which is to say *delight* in the human.”³ Knowledge is comfortable familiarity with particular things; it is the usual relation people have to their surroundings. Reason, not knowledge, sees the limits of one’s access to these things, and still more the limitedness of everything to which one has any access at all.

However, one is not limited merely by the absence of godlike organs. Perhaps still more significant is what one is, one’s instincts, inclinations, passions.

Have you never been plagued by the fear that you might be completely incapable of knowing the truth? The fear that your mind may be too dull and even your subtle faculty of seeing still much too coarse? Have you not noticed what kind of will rules behind your seeing? For example, how yesterday you wanted to see *more* than another, today *differently* from another, or how from the very first you longed to find what others fancied they had found or the opposite of that! Oh shameful craving! How you sometimes looked for something which affected you strongly, sometimes for what soothed you--because you happened to be tired! Always full of secret predeterminations of *how* truth would have to be constituted if *you* would consent to accept it!⁴

There is no escape from such distortions into a “frozen and dry” objectivity. We open our eyes and look at something only when we care about it, when something is at stake. “Are warmth and enthusiasm not needed if a thing of thought is to have *justice* done to it?--*and that precisely is seeing!*” Our inclinations, like our organs, define what we look at; we never get beyond them. “Do you not fear to re-encounter in the cave of every kind of knowledge your own ghost--the ghost which is the veil behind which truth has hidden itself from you?”⁵

³ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 483. Italics in quoted passages are in the original unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 539.

⁵ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 539.

The preceding sentence is probably meant to remind readers of the metaphor of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. Nietzsche implies that one never leaves the cave, never stares at unmediated truth. At most one replaces one cave with another. "Every kind of knowledge," meaning every science, every profession, every way of life, is a cave; nowhere does one see beyond oneself, one's organs and faculties, one's interests and inclinations. There is always something one leaves out, always some perspective from which one's most profound or heartfelt or subtle views would seem shallow, pompous, foolish. "He who considers more deeply knows that, whatever his acts and judgments may be, he is always wrong."⁶

What distinguishes one who "considers deeply" is not knowing more about things so much as knowing how little he knows. "Even great spirits have only their five-fingers' breadth of *experience*--just beyond it their thinking ceases and their endless empty space and stupidity begins."⁷ We all live surrounded by endless empty space (empty to us, that is), space into which we stare perhaps without even seeing that it is there. We resemble a dog hearing people talk, utterly unaware that something complicated is occurring; or an amoeba that does not hear voices at all. Yet holding a multitude of opinions and beliefs is necessary to one's health and satisfaction, to being what one is. Overreaching the narrow realm of experience is an ineluctable human tendency.

However, though we are built to think we know what we don't know, it is possible to see our limits, to some extent. "We are from the very beginning illogical and thus unjust beings *and*

⁶ Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, 518.

⁷ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 564.

can recognize this: this is one of the greatest and most irresolvable discords of existence.”⁸ We can recognize that some opinion or belief, much as it gratifies us or lightens our load, is incomplete or false; in general we can learn to see, to some extent, our own inveterate, invincible tendency and need to form opinions. “Through knowing ourselves, and regarding our own nature as a moving sphere of moods and opinions, and thus learning to despise ourselves a little, we restore our proper equilibrium with others.”⁹

What is perhaps Nietzsche’s most striking statement of the limits of human vision also points to its limited possibilities:

My eyes, however strong or weak they may be, can see only a certain distance, and it is within the space encompassed by this distance that I live and move, the line of this horizon constitutes my immediate fate, in great things and small....Around every being there is described a similar concentric circle, which has a mid-point and is peculiar to him....there is absolutely no escape, no backway or bypath into the *real world*! We sit in our net, we spiders, and whatever we may catch in it, we can catch nothing at all except that which allows itself to be caught in precisely *our* net.¹⁰

Yet many things can be captured in some nets--not the “real world,” whatever that might be, but the psychology of some other men and the beliefs *they* hold. For example: “Thus: a certain false psychology, a certain kind of fantasy in the interpretation of motives and experiences is the necessary presupposition for becoming a Christian and for feeling the need of redemption. With the insight into this aberration of reason and imagination one ceases to be a Christian.”¹¹ Though there is no way to the “real world,” there is--for some--the possibility of recognizing certain

⁸ Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, 32.

⁹ Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, 376. I have altered Hollingdale’s translation slightly.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 117.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, 135.

errors. Different opinions are the necessary unfolding of different natures or men; yet some opinions are more tied to experience and observation than others.

This possibility of a certain limited vision (similar, I believe, to what Plato's Socrates means by "a certain wisdom...perhaps human wisdom"¹²) is more fully articulated in Nietzsche's later works. In *Human, All-Too Human* and *Daybreak*, both of which he published in his mid-thirties, Nietzsche is eager to reveal the limits of human understanding.¹³ He apparently wishes to temper his reader's faith in science, and to undermine the common sense assumption that it is easy to see the world around one. Later the philosophy and religion of the past become his focus and his antagonist; these foes tend to exaggerate rather than minimize how difficult it is to grasp what is around one, so in opposition to them Nietzsche emphasizes the extent to which healthy human beings can see. But his opinion has not fundamentally changed, as the last citation above from *Human, All-Too Human* indicates.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche asserts that the wisest men of all ages have judged alike concerning life, that it is no good. "Even Socrates said, as he died: 'To live--that means to be sick a long time.'" Instead of concluding that this view must be valid, Nietzsche states that these wise men need to be scrutinized. What they say is absurd: From what perspective could it make sense to judge life? Anyone living is an "interested party."¹⁴ "When we speak of values, we speak with the inspiration, with the way of looking at things, which is part of life: life itself

¹² Plato, *Apology*, in *Four Texts on Socrates*, translated by Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), section 20d.

¹³ *The Gay Science*, which Nietzsche published after *Daybreak*, is generally considered the last book of his "middle" period, though it is in some ways closer to "late" than to "middle" Nietzsche.

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), "The Problem of Socrates," 1.

forces us to posit values; life itself values through us when we posit values.”¹⁵ This is true above all when one values life itself. One is compelled by “life,” in other words by one’s own life, by what one is, to feel a certain way about life, to value it in a certain way. One does not “choose” one’s values, rationally or otherwise. (Nietzsche avoids speaking of “one’s life” because that would imply that the ego possesses life, while his view is that life gives rise to the ego. He speaks of “life” rather than of “being” or “nature” because the latter terms are static, while the former suggests a process, change, becoming.)

Judgments about life “have value only as symptoms.”¹⁶ A positive judgment reveals healthy, ascending life; a negative judgment reveals decay. Nietzsche views decadent and healthy as the two fundamental types of life, the two fundamental value-dispositions. (Of course most people are a complicated mixture of the two.) Neither is right or wrong; both judge as they must, which is to say, they judge correctly for themselves. “To *have* to fight the instincts--that is the formula of decadence: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness equals instinct.”¹⁷ Sensing that their instincts lead to chaos and decline, the decadent are drawn to a strict moral regimen or strait-jacket, sweetened by the promise of eventual “redemption.”

Those whom Nietzsche calls decadent might (and do) retort that they are “healthy” and Nietzsche the “decadent” one. But the term “healthy,” unlike “lovable,” although relative (things are more or less healthy), is not a description of one’s feeling or reaction. Healthy means a thing functions well, grows, adapts to necessity. A longing for “redemption” seems hard to reconcile

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” 5.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 2.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 11.

with the usual meaning of the term. (Of course so does going insane at age 44.)

Nietzsche famously declares that life is will to power.¹⁸ This view runs against the grain for many or most people. If Nietzsche is right, then such people are hostile to the truth about themselves, and perhaps to what they truly are; but “life itself forces” them to feel as they do, to value as they do. By contrast, those who delight in will to power are capable of a more full and just understanding, a point to which I will return below; but rejoicing and loving, and finding painful and hating, are immediate instinctive dispositions, which do not spring from understanding or misunderstanding. But is this sufficient? Doesn’t the healthy disposition give rise to what is somehow the full human reaction? Something like this thought seems to be why, for example, Leo Strauss largely ignores Nietzsche’s presentation of decadence and considers how will to power might be lovable.¹⁹ Strauss’s procedure may make sense as he tries to understand will to power, but that doesn’t mean the full or healthy human reaction reveals truth. There is no reason why a man’s (or any organism’s) values or feelings are the measure of things, or meaningful in any way beyond himself. In this sense we each face the universe alone. A healthy disposition is more desirable or enviable than a decadent one, but that doesn’t make it more true or valid, any more than an athlete’s desire for activity is more true or valid than a sick man’s fatigue. There is no single true or natural human disposition, unless what one means by true or natural is healthy or desirable; there are simply different individuals and different dispositions.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 13.

¹⁹ Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 181.

Instincts or drives are ultimately physical. “All those bold insanities of metaphysics, especially answers to the question about the *value* of existence, may always be considered first of all as the symptoms of certain bodies.”²⁰ A healthy body is growing, ascending, in harmony; life is sweet to one so constituted. An unhealthy body, whether or not struck by any particular illness, is decaying, chaotic, at odds with itself.

It isn't unusual to suggest that the sickly and old tend to resent life in others and to feel threatened by it, as by anything that might rock their fragile vessels; however, Nietzsche goes further than this. He makes the arresting suggestion that a “typically morbid” being is decadent even in its prime.²¹ What does it mean to be “typically morbid”? “To *have* to fight the instincts”—what is that? Here is one illuminating remark: “Basic insight regarding the nature of decadence: *its supposed causes are its consequences.*”²² A man who entangles himself in drugs or vice, for example, is not fundamentally foolish or misled; he is simply being what he is. His life, his body, his instincts do not engage him, excite him, please him; he is inclined towards an escape, an alternative to life as he experiences it.

A healthy man does not lose himself in drugs or vice, not because he forbids them to himself (which can be another form decadence takes), but because they do not *taste good* to him. He has better things to do. One mark of a healthy nature is an instinctive “waiting and postponing any reaction,” a slowness to respond to stimuli, not out of will or decision, but out of

²⁰ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), “Preface for the Second Edition,” 2.

²¹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, “Why I Am So Wise,” 2.

²² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 41.

an instinctive resistance which is part of a strong sense of self.²³ Such a person may experiment with the vices that consume weaker lives—“living *experimentally*” is “the master’s privilege,” a privilege or even a need of “*great health*”--but while doing so he never wholly loses the feeling that his life aims elsewhere.²⁴

Of course most people are neither sickly nor drug addicts, yet Nietzsche considers “the *majority* of mortals” to be “physiologically deformed and deranged.”²⁵ This has a harsh and implausible sound, at least to our democratic ears, but here is another way of making the same point: “The peoples are so greatly deceived because they are always *seeking* a deceiver....Intoxication means more to them than nourishment.”²⁶ For someone healthy, on the other hand, the core of life, the thrust and pleasure of living, is following his instincts, being what he is--nourishment, in other words, not intoxication. (One might consider in this context that Americans reportedly spend an average of three hours a day, which is half the leisure time they have, watching television.²⁷)

Decadence is anything which doesn’t function, doesn’t work, isn’t suited to being what it is. The decisive sign of decadence is the longing for escape or salvation. “Every philosophy that ranks peace above war, every ethic with a negative definition of happiness, every metaphysics and physics that knows some *finale*, some final state of some sort, every predominantly aesthetic

²³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 45.

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, “Preface,” 4.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), Third Essay, 1.

²⁶ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 188.

²⁷ Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, “Television Addiction,” *Scientific American*, February 2002, 76.

or religious craving for some Apart, Beyond, Outside, Above, permits the question whether it was not sickness that inspired the philosopher.”²⁸ The craving for an “Apart” or “Beyond” arises when an organism finds painful the life it is really living.

However, as Tolstoy says of unhappy families, every decadent is decadent in his own way. Nietzsche says, for example, that “those with weak nerves and the decadents” have “a need for pepper, even for cruelty--.”²⁹ The attraction to the shocking and lurid (the taste of fans of current American movies and popular music is perhaps an example) is a sign of decadence, a decadence that consists not of finding one’s life terribly painful, but of finding it unexciting, limited, insipid. (I take weak nerves, *Nervenschwachen*, to mean not so much frail nerves as nerves which are not powerful, which yield little stimulation, little flavor--hence the need for “pepper.”) But finding one’s life monotonous can also lead to religion.³⁰ Whatever the individual variation, the incapacity to find satisfaction in being what one is, is decadence.

Of course the Christian who longs for a peaceful afterlife, and the corrupt Roman who takes delight in seeing the Christian attacked by a lion, are both being what they are. Each is following strong instincts, instincts that other people share to some extent. Nonetheless, the craving for fleeting violent spectacles, and the longing for a static eternity, are both grotesque, from a healthy man’s point of view. Nietzsche says of health and decadence that “there are only differences in degree between these two kinds of existence: the exaggeration, the disproportion,

²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, “Preface,” 2.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 119.

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too Human*, 115.

the nonharmony of the normal phenomena constitute the pathological state.”³¹

Where it exists, health is of course in flux, a balance among different forces and drives, never free of fragility, certainly never permanent. Health is rarer than decadence; so many things can go wrong in a complicated organism. “Grant me from time to time--if there are divine goddesses in the realm beyond good and evil--grant me the sight, but *one* glance of something perfect, wholly achieved, happy, mighty, triumphant, still capable of arousing fear! Of a man who justifies *man*, of a complementary and redeeming lucky hit on the part of man for the sake of which one may still *believe in man!*”³² The healthy man is a lucky hit; decadence of one sort or another is the rule. Of himself Nietzsche says, “I have a subtler sense of smell for the signs of ascent and decline than any other human being before me; I am the teacher *par excellence* for this--I know both, I am both.”³³

Earlier philosophers have been particularly interesting instances of decadence. Nietzsche offers the following glance inside Plato’s head:

How can one see this rejoicing crowd without feeling with them and being moved to tears! Previously we thought little of the object of their rejoicing and would still think little of it *if* we had not now experienced it! To what, then, may our experiences not impel us! What really are our opinions! If we are not to lose ourselves, if we are not to lose our *reason*, we have to flee from experiences! Thus did Plato flee from reality and desire to see things only in pallid mental pictures; he was full of sensibility and knew how easily the waves of his sensibility could close over his reason.³⁴

Plato dreaded losing the superiority he felt he had found in reason, though the grip on things it

³¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 47.

³² Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay, 12.

³³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Am So Wise,” 1.

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 448.

appeared to provide came at the cost of flatness, pallor, artificiality. He could not face the power and instability of experience, meaning above all his own experiences, his own inclinations.³⁵

Nietzsche finds Socrates a still more intriguing case. In *Twilight of the Idols* he paints a portrait of Socrates which is undeniably fascinating, though one might wonder how closely it truly resembles its subject. Nietzsche begins with Socrates' undisputed physical ugliness. "Ugliness is often enough the expression of a development that has been crossed, *thwarted* by crossing." Different races and different instincts have been combined in a mixture in which nothing healthy grows. "The anthropologists among the criminologists tell us that the typical criminal is ugly: *monstrum in fronte, monstrum in animo*. But the criminal is a decadent. Was Socrates a typical criminal?"³⁶

Socrates' possible criminality is revealed "not only by the admitted wantonness and anarchy of his instincts," by which Nietzsche means especially his erotic instincts, "but also by the hypertrophy of the logical faculty and that *malice of the rachitic* which distinguishes him."³⁷ Throughout the ages readers have taken Socrates' erotic interest in young men as a personal peccadillo, a peculiarity common at the time and surely irrelevant to his serious philosophic doctrines. Nietzsche, on the other hand, finds Socrates' doctrines absurd, but he sees the erotic desires as the key to the man.

Socrates is no fool. His absurd teachings, and still more his incessant dialectic, must

³⁵ The description bears a certain resemblance to the character Karenin in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. One might of course wonder how accurately it represents Plato.

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "The Problem of Socrates," 3.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "The Problem of Socrates," 4. I have altered Kaufmann's translation slightly for the sake of greater literalness.

point to something. “Everything in him is exaggerated, *buffo*, a caricature; everything is at the same time concealed, ulterior, subterranean.”³⁸ Nietzsche concludes that Socrates seeks to counter his “dark appetites” with a “permanent daylight....One must be clever, clear, bright at any price; any concession to the instincts, to the unconscious, leads *downward*.”³⁹ Thus emerges the “bizarre” equation of “reason, virtue, and happiness.”⁴⁰ Socrates hopes to build *against* his instincts a new kind of life.

The effort cannot succeed. The decadent cannot so remake themselves that living becomes good for them; at most they can give their decadence a new form. “Socrates was a misunderstanding....The most blinding daylight; rationality at any price; life, bright, cold, cautious, without instinct, in opposition to the instincts--all this too was a mere disease, another disease, and by no means a return to ‘virtue,’ to ‘health,’ to happiness. To *have* to fight the instincts--that is the formula of decadence.”⁴¹ Nietzsche suggests that Socrates eventually knew of the impossibility of overcoming his decadence. “Was this what he said to himself in the end, in the *wisdom* of his courage to die?”⁴² His many imitators were not so self-aware.⁴³

How did such a man meet with so favorable a reception? “Wherever authority still forms

³⁸ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 4.

³⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 10.

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 4.

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 11.

⁴² Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 12.

⁴³ Nietzsche discusses Socrates in several other works, particularly *The Birth of Tragedy*, but *Twilight of the Idols* provides his most complete as well as his final portrait. To my knowledge the best scholarly treatment of Nietzsche’s view of Socrates is, appropriately enough, *Nietzsche’s View of Socrates* by Werner Dannhauser (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

part of good bearing, where one does not give reasons but commands, the dialectician is a kind of buffoon: one laughs at him, one does not take him seriously.” In such a society men feel it is in bad taste to be always giving reasons. “What must first be proved is worth little.”⁴⁴ (One might wonder what Nietzsche thinks his own philosophy will accomplish, a point to which I will return.) Nietzsche infers that the Greeks of Socrates’ time listened to him because they too were decadents. Socrates was “merely the extreme case, only the most striking instance of what was then beginning to be a universal distress: no one was any longer master over himself, the instincts turned against each other.”⁴⁵ To the other Greeks, Socrates seemed to be in control of his appetites. Imitating him, they tried to replace their instincts with a formula (reason equals virtue equals happiness). Socrates is thus the founder of morality as we know it, which Nietzsche calls “anti-natural morality.”⁴⁶

Subsequent philosophers, prior to Nietzsche, are more or less consciously Socrates’ pupils. They share his distrust of the instincts, his wariness of the real, the palpable. Nietzsche speaks of philosophers’ “lack of historical sense, their hatred of the very idea of becoming, their Egypticism.” They feel that only eternal things have any significance. “Death, change, old age, as well as procreation and growth, are to their minds objections--even refutations.” However, they cannot help noticing that they do not *see* any stability, any being. They think that “there must be some deception which prevents us from perceiving that which has being: where is the deceiver?” They find the deceiver in the senses. “These senses, which are so immoral in other

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 5.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” 9.

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” 5.

ways too, deceive us concerning the *true* world. Moral: let us free ourselves from the deception of the senses, from becoming, from history, from lies.”⁴⁷

For Nietzsche the senses are free of deception; the mistakes men make originate in consciousness, in interpretation. He agrees with Heraclitus that all is becoming rather than being, but he maintains against Heraclitus (and with other philosophers) that this is what the senses show us. What we make of the testimony of the senses alone introduces lies, such as the “lie of thinghood, of substance, of permanence.”⁴⁸ “Thinghood” and “substance” imply stability, and that a thing exists apart from what it is doing or being.

Philosophers do not invent the “lie of thinghood,” however; it is part of language itself. From its beginning language “sees a doer and doing; it believes in will as *the* cause; it believes in the ego, in the ego as being, in the ego as substance, and it projects this faith in the ego-substance upon all things--only thereby does it first *create* the concept of ‘thing.’” Language is impossible without nouns being distinct from verbs. This distinction implies that the nouns are *causes* of the verbs, and people absorb this assumption. If one sees a child smiling, for example, one is wont to think that the child is causing the smile, choosing to smile, though what one sees is better described as child-smiling, a noun-verb which says nothing about causality. “Very much later, in a world which was in a thousand ways more enlightened,” philosophers noticed that the belief in thinghood was unfounded, despite men’s certainty in handling the category. “And in India, as in Greece, the same mistake was made: ‘We must once have been at home in a higher world...we

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” 1.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” 2.

must have been divine, *for* we have reason!”⁴⁹

Socrates and his epigones cling to language precisely because of the “lie of thinghood.” They shun whatever is living, changing, therefore uncertain, in favor of a stable or dead world of the imagination. They become philosophers in order to escape life, their own life, their own instincts. “Let us say No to all who have faith in the senses, to all the rest of mankind; they are all ‘mob.’ Let us be philosophers! Let us be mummies!”⁵⁰ Once reason compels them to recognize the unfoundedness of language’s assumptions, they find a new way to avoid giving up those assumptions. Nietzsche himself may be the first man who is a philosopher in spite of rather than because of the errors of language (though he does not call himself a philosopher in *Twilight of the Idols*).

A second “idiosyncrasy” of philosophers “consists in confusing the last and the first.” Though the evidence of the senses suggests that everything incessantly acts upon and is acted upon by everything else, philosophers feel there must be something stable, safe, and separate from the flux in which they live; they delight in asserting the insignificance of the world around them compared to that one. “The higher *may* not grow out of the lower, may not have grown at all,” for only what is eternal and stable has dignity. Therefore, “whatever is of the first rank must be *causa sui*....All the highest values...must therefore be *causa sui*. All these, moreover, cannot be unlike each other or in contradiction to each other. Thus they arrive at their stupendous concept, ‘God.’ That which is the last, thinnest, and emptiest is put first, as *the*

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” 5.

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” 1.

cause, as *ens realissimum*.”⁵¹

Of course men believe in gods long before there are philosophers--indeed it is then that they believe most genuinely and intensely.⁵² But early gods are spirits that inhabit or control particular things, such as lightning, the sun, or an animal; philosophers make divinity abstract, single, rational, omnipotent. The decadence of philosophers, their instinctive longing for a realm wholly unlike the one they experience, assisted by the confusion implicit in language, gives birth to God and a “true world” of infinitely greater dignity than our actual surroundings. “‘Reason’ in language--oh, what an old deceptive female she is! I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.”⁵³

In *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche gives a history of morality in six stages, which he calls “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable, The History of an Error.” The first stage is “The true world--attainable for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man; he lives in it; *he is it*.” This corresponds to Socrates’ formula that reason equals virtue equals happiness, or to Plato’s notion of the ideas, which can be known by the wise man.

The second stage is “The true world--unattainable for now, but promised for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man (‘for the sinner who repents’).” Platonism has transformed itself into Christianity; it has become “more subtle, insidious, incomprehensible...*female*.” Platonists are unable to find with certainty the “true world” of “ideas,” so they conclude that the true world must be a little farther off. They do not--as decadents they cannot--abandon it.

⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” 4.

⁵² Nietzsche, *Human, All-too Human*, 110.

⁵³ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” 5.

In the third stage, which is Kantian, the “true world” becomes unattainable in principle. In the fourth stage, the “true world” is seen as unconsoling since unattainable, and therefore without obligations for us. Nietzsche calls this stage: “Gray morning. The first yawn of reason.”

In the fifth stage, the “true” world is abolished. “Bright day; breakfast; return of *bon sens* and cheerfulness....pandemonium of all free spirits.” Nietzsche seems to mean by this the point reached by “free spirits” and “good Europeans” in his own time. In the sixth stage, which is that of Nietzsche himself, the true world has been abolished. “What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.*”⁵⁴ Now that there is no “true world,” men can see that their actual surroundings are not mere appearance. Moreover, there is no “world,” no stable and eternal entity: there is no standard by which to judge the flux around and in us. The “innocence of becoming” is restored.

This history gives some idea of what Nietzsche intends to accomplish with his books even though “what must first be proved is worth little.” It is worthwhile to *disprove* things that stifle life. In pre-Socratic Greece, where no reigning belief attacked becoming as empty and sinful, a healthy man simply followed his instincts. Once anti-natural morality became dominant, however, it had to be refuted.

The level now attained by man, or at least by Nietzsche himself, as a result of the confrontation with morality, is higher than that of the pre-Socratic Greeks: Nietzsche is more conscious than they, without being merely conscious. Thus he calls the last stage in the “History of an Error” the “high point of humanity.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable,” 6.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable,” 6.

Summarizing his attack on morality, Nietzsche says: “Let us finally consider how naive it is altogether to say: ‘Man *ought* to be such and such!’ Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types, the abundance of a lavish play and change of forms--and some wretched loafer of a moralist comments: ‘No! Man ought to be different.’ He even knows what man should be like, this wretched bigot and prig: he paints himself on the wall and comments, ‘*Ecce homo!*’” A man is what he is; he has become what he is as the result of all the necessities which caused him. “To say to him, ‘Change yourself!’ is to demand that everything be changed, even retroactively.” Nonetheless, there have been consistent moralists who made this demand. “To that end, they *negated* the world!”⁵⁶

Morality is an “error,” an “*idiosyncrasy of degenerates*,” which has caused “immeasurable harm” to those with healthy instincts. However, though Nietzsche hopes to undo at least some of this harm, he does not seek to abolish morality; to do so would be tantamount to telling the moralists: “Change yourselves!” Moreover, he has a positive reason for not seeking to abolish morality. He speaks of “the economy in the law of life which finds an advantage even in the disgusting species of the prigs, the priests, the virtuous. *What* advantage? But we ourselves, we immoralists are the answer.”⁵⁷ Immoralists know that the existence of a group depends upon the existence of the opponents against whom it defines itself.

To conclude, the healthy benefit from seeing what really is, especially what they really are. To them the errors of morality are poison. To decadence, however, life is painful; it necessarily seeks to hide from itself, to invent “true worlds” and gods. These different types

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” 6.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” 6.

perceive and experience things very differently; but this does not mean that nothing either thinks is true. Of course every seeing is a focus that leaves out much more than it comprises, but seeing can still be more or less honest, more or less open, and more or less aware of its own limitations. What Nietzsche himself says, what engages him, what he emphasizes, is sharply individual. But what he says is honest at its core, according to him, while the core of what Plato and Socrates say is a fantasy, a lie. Thus Nietzsche's perspectivism does not mean that his view of morality is no more or less accurate than anybody else's; rather his perspectivism is to a large extent *part* of his view of morality. Nietzsche does not seek to provide the "whole truth" about morality, whatever that might mean; but he believes that he makes a deeper, more powerful cut into the reality of morality than anybody else ever has.