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Perhaps We Should Walk On The Sky

This paper is an inquiry into, and evaluation of, Nietzsche's epistemology. Thus it will attempt two main things: (1) elucidate passages in which we can get a foundation of Nietzsche's epistemology; (2) attempt to withstand that epistemology to criticism.

Before we attempt to understand Nietzsche's epistemology, it is important first to recognize Nietzsche's belief about the world as the "flux of becoming and passing away" (4).¹ This idea is very simple: the world is in a state of constant flux in which things continuously come-to-be (i.e., "becoming") and cease-to-be (i.e., "passing away"). Thus, when we inquire into Nietzsche's epistemology, we must always have this view of the world in mind.

The majority of our inquiry will focus on passages that highlight two main points: what Nietzsche identifies as the utility of knowledge, and why actual knowledge is an impossibility and merely a necessary falsification.

In section 480 Nietzsche writes that "knowledge works as a tool of power." We can understand a "tool of power" as a tool of which its function is to increase some sort of power. Thus, the function of knowledge, it seems, is to increase some sort of power. We still have no idea as to how knowledge increases our power and what it increases our power of. These ideas are explained later in the section.

Nietzsche tells us how knowledge increases our power as follows:

In order for a particular species to maintain itself and increase its power, its conception of reality must comprehend enough of the calculable and constant for it to base a scheme of behavior on it. (480)

First, if we are to take the first half of this passage literally, then we should infer that for a species to "maintain itself" is different from a species "increasing its power" because they are

¹ All parenthetical references refer to section heading numbers in: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, W. Kaufmann, trans. (Vintage, 1968).

separated by "and"; thus, we should view them as two different ideas. This seems correct: in order to for a species to increase its power it has to first maintain itself. That being said, we should read this passage as providing a criterion for a species to *maintain itself* and *increase its power*. The criterion is provided in the second half of the sentence: "its [i.e., a species'] conception of reality must comprehend enough of the calculable and constant for it to base a scheme of behavior on it." Let's understand this criterion by first understanding three concepts: (a) *conception of reality*, (b) *the calculable and constant*, (c) *scheme of behavior*.

We should understand "conception" in a truth-neutral way—i.e., simply as an idea or a belief that may be true or false; this way we avoid assuming our conception has any truth-value to it. We can take "reality" to refer to the world. Thus, a *conception of reality* can be understood simply as an idea of the world.

The concept of *the calculable and constant* seems more difficult, because, prima facie, it seems inconsistent with Nietzsche's view of the world in flux. If the world is in a state of flux, in which everything is continuously coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be, then it is not clear what would count as "calculable" or "constant." First, a world of continuous flux means there is never a moment in which something is not coming and ceasing to be, otherwise it would be *discontinuous*, not continuous. In such a world, "constancy" seems to be a contradiction: something constant would have to fail to *cease to be*; but this is impossible amidst continuous flux. Likewise for something calculable: as soon as we were to calculate something, it would cease to be, and something new would replace it. Thus, it seems, everything is neither calculable nor constant.

This seeming inconsistency is not easily reconciled. The only obvious option is to appeal to the truth-neutrality of our conception of reality. This reconciliation would work as follows:

since our conception of reality is truth-neutral, and *the calculable and constant* are contained within our conception, then it follows that they should be viewed as truth-neutral as well. Thus, the inconsistency is non-problematic because our conception can contain false concepts; in other words, A and B are not inconsistent if one is assumed false (in this case, the calculable and the constant).

We can understand the concept of *scheme of behavior* straightforwardly: a plan or program of actions. What is left unexplained, at this point, is what the plan or program of actions is for—i.e., what end the plan or program is concerned with.

With these three concepts in mind we can revisit the criterion: *its conception of reality must comprehend enough of the calculable and constant for it to base a scheme of behavior on it*. We can think of this as follows: our idea of the world must include enough concepts of things as calculable and constant in order to base a plan of action on it; in other words, our plan of action must be based on things that we view as calculable and constant. Otherwise, it seems, we could not even form thoughts at all; there must be something calculable that we can count as forming.

Moreover, in the next sentence Nietzsche tells us what the scheme of behavior is to be planned around—i.e., what end we concern our plan of action with:

The utility of preservation...stands as the motive behind the development of the organs of knowledge—they develop in such a way that their observations suffice for our preservation.

This passage indicates “preservation” as the end with which our “scheme of behavior” is concerned. Our “organs of knowledge” develop in such a way that they enable us to conceive of things as calculable and constant. Somehow, these conceptions “suffice for our preservation.” Thus, according to Nietzsche, in order to “maintain ourselves and increase our power” our idea of the world must include enough concepts of things as constant and calculable in order to preserve ourselves.

At this point, we have to elucidate two ideas: (1) what it is about having ideas that are calculable and constant that are useful for our preservation; (2) what power it is that we are increasing.

The first idea Nietzsche addresses in the previous section, 479: “we interpret [the world] by means of the schematism of ‘things.’” What Nietzsche means by the “schematism of things” is the same as *calculable* and *constant* ideas. When we schematize we go from particulars to general categories; when we see, e.g., several particular oranges, we schematize them into the category of *orange*. The category of orange is constant; we can identify all the particulars in the world that fall into that category. Likewise for the calculable: we form the abstract category of quantity (one, two, three and so on) and we can tell you the quantity of particulars of a category that are present; e.g., we can tell you the quantity of oranges that are present. In other words we can calculate the number of particulars of a given category. It seems that this type of schematization is quite useful in our preservation: we can refer to things with greater ease, remember which things we encountered, record the effects of certain amounts of things, etc.

The second idea (i.e., what power we increase) Nietzsche addresses in the last sentence of 480: “a species grasps a certain amount of reality in order to become master of it, in order to press it into service.” This is the power we increase: the power of becoming “master” over reality, of being able to “press reality into our service.” From the calculable and constant concepts, e.g., of heat and friction, we get fire; with fire, we get warmth and cooked meals, and so on. This, according to Nietzsche, transcends mere maintenance, and represents a legitimate increase in power, the pressing of reality into our service.

In summary: the function of knowledge is to maintain ourselves and increase our power over reality. In order to do these we must conceive of reality in terms of calculable and constant ideas.

Given this understanding of knowledge, we must now inquire into why Nietzsche thinks knowledge is impossible, and merely a necessary falsification. In the last sentence of section 507, Nietzsche states this idea concisely:

Because we have to be stable in our beliefs if we are to prosper, we have made the “real” world a world not of change and becoming, but one of being.

This seems very consistent with what we have just discussed. The first half of the sentence—“because we have to be stable in our beliefs if we are to prosper”—is merely a restatement of the abovementioned criterion for maintaining ourselves and increasing our power. When he says, “we have to be stable in our beliefs,” he refers to our need to conceive the world as calculable and constant—in a word, as “fixed.” The second half of the sentence explains the consequences of this need to view the world as fixed: “we [make] the ‘real’ world a world not of change and becoming, but one of being.” In other words, Nietzsche accuses us of altering reality from “becoming” to “being,” i.e., from “flux” to “fixity.”

Moreover, given Nietzsche’s belief about the world as a state of flux, then this is more than a mere *alteration* of reality; it is a *falsification* of reality. It is a falsification of reality because our conception of the world does not correspond to the “real” world; i.e., fixity does not correspond to flux. Thus, since we have a need to view the world in this fixed way, we therefore have a need to view the world in a false way. Nietzsche makes this point concisely in section 853: “That lies are necessary in order to live is itself part of the terrifying...character of existence.” The “necessary lies” to which he refers are the necessary conceptions of things as calculable and constant, instead of as in a state of flux. This explains our original confusion regarding the

inconsistency between our *conception of reality* containing ideas that are *calculable* and *constant* and the flux. That inconsistency is accurate; it constitutes the falsification.

In summary: in order to maintain ourselves and increase our power we view the world as fixed.² But, this fixity does not correspond to the constant flux that the world actually is. Consequentially, we, of necessity, view the world in a false way. Thus, if we assume knowledge to require truth, actual knowledge is impossible; instead, what we call “knowledge” is merely a necessary falsification; i.e., there is no knowledge because “facts [are] precisely what there [are] not, only interpretations”(481).

Any fair criticism of this epistemology must concede Nietzsche’s belief about the world as in a constant state of flux. Thus, we will attempt to have actual knowledge amidst a world of flux. Our starting point will be the recognition of the flux itself. Nietzsche does not argue for the correctness of this view, nor does he explain from where he thinks the idea comes. It’s clear enough that the idea of the world in flux originates as early as Heraclitus. What is not clear is where Nietzsche thinks that idea came from in Heraclitus. It seems there are really only two options: the idea is known *a priori*, or the idea comes from experience. Given the counter-intuitiveness of the former, and Nietzsche’s rejection of *a priori* beliefs, it seems fair to assume the idea must come from experience.³ In general, the relevant experiences are those in which we perceive the change of many things: e.g., a seed to a tree, the decomposition of a piece of fruit, the constant growth and eventual death of a person, the rise and fall of empires, etc. Through these experiences we can get the idea that things change—they come to be, and eventually cease to be.

² It seems that however much we regard the drive to maintain ourselves as a natural human disposition, we can do the same for the drive to increase our power. This is because the maximization of maintenance seems directly proportional to the maximization of our power. Thus, it seems the drive to maintain ourselves necessitates the drive to increase our power.

³ Throughout *The Will To Power*, Nietzsche attacks *a priori* knowledge.

These experiences seem sufficient for the idea of *occasional* flux, but we must say more as to why they engender the idea of a *constant* flux.⁴ We experience the flux only when one phenomenon replaces another—e.g., when the phenomenon of water in its liquid state is replaced by the phenomenon of ice. This type of change seems explainable only in terms of a continuous flux. As water cools, its molecules slowly decelerate, until finally, that deceleration reaches a point at which the majority of them stick together long enough to form a solid. It's not as if water can leap from 10°C to 0°C without passing through 9°C, 8°C, 7°C, etc.; the change is continuous. Likewise for a seed that grows to a tree: the phenomenon of seed cannot be replaced by the phenomenon of tree without first being replaced by the intermittent phenomena. The only way to account for our experience of change is through the idea of a continuous flux, in which gradual changes, at a certain point, result in phenomenal changes.

Whether the above reasoning precisely represents Nietzsche's reasoning behind his idea of the flux is unimportant. The main point is that it is *relevantly similar*. Let me explain. The central idea of Nietzsche's epistemology is that *actual* knowledge is impossible, and what we call knowledge is merely a necessary falsification of reality. Implicit in this view is a criterion for true and false concepts: true concepts must correspond to reality, i.e., how the world *actually* is; false concepts are those that fail to correspond. Because of this criterion, Nietzsche is able to claim that our concepts of things as fixed are false—which is an essential part of his epistemology. We can only regard these concepts as false if we accept his criterion; i.e., if we accept that they fail to correspond to reality. Likewise, the criterion for truth is implicit in the former: if fixity doesn't correspond to reality, it is because reality is in flux; i.e., our concept of reality as a state of flux corresponds to how the world actually is; i.e., our concept of the world as

⁴ *Constant flux* is essential to Nietzsche's epistemology because, without it, there can be moments of fixity and thus, possible truth.

in flux is true. Thus, Nietzsche must produce some sort of reasoning that supports the truth of the flux. The former reasoning seems, at least, on the right track.

If, however, Nietzsche subscribes to the former criterion for truth—which, in order to be consistent, it seems he must—then Nietzsche has also provided us with a criterion for actual knowledge. Knowledge is simply a *true* conception of the world; i.e., a conception of the world that corresponds to how the world actually is. Thus, the conception of the world as in a state of flux is knowledge. But this is inconsistent with the impossibility of knowledge.

Though this may seem, *prima facie*, an objection to Nietzsche's epistemology, its point is negligible. First, Nietzsche must allow the conception of the world as flux to count as true if he desires the least bit of relevance to his epistemology. So, to merely point out that the flux is true is not an objection. The only potential this has as an objection is if it is inconsistent with Nietzsche's charge that knowledge is impossible. It seems to be obviously inconsistent with Nietzsche's claim that there are no facts, only interpretations (481). But, this is merely nit-picking. This objection can be easily avoided by a mere qualification: *beyond the knowledge that the world is in flux*, there is no *further* knowledge possible, only interpretation. Moreover, this qualification does not seem to detract any of the force from our original explication of Nietzsche's epistemology; it merely makes explicit that the flux is known. Ultimately, this is not an objection to, but actually a *strengthening of* Nietzsche's epistemology—it makes his foundation actually known.

This qualification seems quite consistent with what Nietzsche writes in section 616, “The world...is ‘in flux,’ as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting nearer the truth: for—there is no ‘truth.’” In this passage, Nietzsche first explains the correct state of the world—“in flux.” Then, he explains the epistemological consequences of

such a world: "there is no 'truth,'" only "falsehood always changing." Since, once again, we *need* to view the world in fixed concepts, and our conceptual fixity does not correspond to the world's flux, we are stuck with falsity. The falsehood is *always changing* because the non-correspondence is always different; at one moment our fixed concepts don't correspond to the flux; at the next moment our fixed concepts don't correspond to a *changed* flux. In other words: the *formal* reason for the falsity is the same: *non-correspondence*. But, correspondence requires at least two variables (in our case, exactly two: our concepts and the world). Since one of these variables is in constant change (i.e., the world), the non-correspondence is also in constant change. Thus, we have a constantly changing non-correspondence; i.e., a "falsehood [that is] always changing."

Though our original objection was futile, there seems to be the seeds of a stronger objection within it. It seems that the fundamental epistemological problem is merely a conceptual problem: our concepts of the world don't correspond to the reality of the world. Thus, knowledge would be possible if our ideas did correspond. It seems, *prima facie*, we can achieve this in one of two ways: (1) only form concepts that are not fixed, but in flux; (2) identify some sort of fixity in the world to which our fixed concepts correspond. Nietzsche claims both of these are impossible. We should note immediately that our concept of the world in flux must exemplify one or both of these ways: it is either a fluid (i.e., *in-flux*) concept, or a fixed concept corresponding to fixity in the world. It's not clear what sense we can make of the former: our concept of the world doesn't seem to be fluid—no matter the degree to which the world changes, our concept seems fixed in maintaining *that* the world changes, nonetheless. Thus, it must be an example of the latter. This seems true—what is fixed about the world is that it is in flux. Thus, we have a fixed concept corresponding to fixity in the world.

This type of correspondence must serve as our paradigm of knowledge. Our problem is, once again, whether there is any fixity in the world beyond the fixity of the world's flux. It seems there is—though it is not "fixity" properly so-called. Instead, we shall use the term "*transient stability*." *Transient stability* refers to the phenomenally stable things of the world. Consider, e.g., a chair in front of us. When we look at the chair, we do not perceive the phenomenon of flux; we perceive stability. But, this type of stability is impermanent. If we were to live long enough, we would eventually perceive the phenomenon of the chair replaced by the phenomenon of a decomposed chair. Thus, the phenomenal stability is transient—i.e., *transient stability*. This type of stability is compatible with constant flux. In fact, it is the constant flux that accounts for the transient nature of the stability: in time, unobservable molecular changes (i.e., the flux) eventuate(s) phenomenal changes.

This transient stability of the world makes possible an abundance of knowledge. First, it enables us to make legitimate distinctions. When, e.g., we smash into a tree, because of the *transient stability* of the tree and ourselves we recognize a *distinction* between the tree and ourselves. This distinction is transient, because eventually we will both decompose into the *same* thing and thus destroy the distinction—but it is still a distinction, nonetheless (i.e., a transient distinction—a distinction between two transiently stable things). Additionally, e.g., it was the transient stability of wood and stone that enabled the first humans to make fire, and so on.

It is important to note that this method of reasoning is consistent with the type Nietzsche must use to derive the flux in the first place. Nietzsche (or anyone else) must observe changes in nature in order to think of the idea of the world in flux; we can't even come up with the idea of a single change without first experiencing change—let alone come up with the idea of permanent and pervasive change. But, since we derive this idea from experience, it is important to elucidate

what ideas experience can and cannot provide for us. It seems that what we actually observe is the change of *things*; we don't actually observe the *flux*; we observe certain phenomena replaced by other phenomena. Once again, e.g., we observe *seeds* changing to *trees*, *caterpillars* to *butterflies*, *lively, green grasslands* to *dead brown ones*, *great empires* to *shanty towns*, *crawling infants* to *running adults*, and so on. This is a change of *things*. We may rightfully infer that in order to explain these changes, other, tiny, unobservable changes must simultaneously take place. We cannot, however, make this inference while denying that there are *things*—i.e., transient stability amidst the constant change. There cannot be *change* without transiently stable things to be changed. Thus, the only way to deny transient stability is to deny change altogether.

In fact, this is precisely what Nietzsche does. In section 531 he explains this as follows:

(No need to block quote)

We have regarded the effect as something that effects, and this we have regarded as a being...But...the concept of effect is arbitrary...[we] separate that which effects from the effecting.

In this passage Nietzsche charges us with misunderstanding the change of cause and effect. "We have regarded the *effect* as something that *effects*." Take a seeming effect, e.g., a stubbed toe. The stubbed toe is an effect produced by contact between a toe and say, a sidewalk. Nietzsche says we don't regard it as an effect, but instead as "*something that effects*"; i.e., as a *thing* that will produce other effects; i.e., "we have regarded [it] as a *being*." But Nietzsche thinks this is problematic for two reasons: (i) "the concept of effect is arbitrary"; (ii) we "separate *that which effects* from the *effecting*."

The "concept of effect is arbitrary" means that there is no truth to what an effect is; we have complete control over what we ascribe "effect" to. Why? The only reason Nietzsche can think this is if he maintains his idea that there are no *things*, no *beings*. This, as we know, he

holds due to the flux of becoming: because we merely interpret "thinghood" into the world, what counts as a thing is arbitrary, and what counts as an effect is thereby arbitrary as well. There are no beings like tables, chairs, trees, people; these are all arbitrary ascriptions of the concept "effect" (or "being").

It is because of this arbitrariness that he can accuse us of separating *that which effects* from the *effecting*. Nietzsche doesn't think there is a *that* which effects; he does not think there are any actual "thats." In other words, since there are no *things*, there are no *things that effect*, either. Instead, there is only the *effecting*; i.e., there is only the constantly changing; i.e., there is only the flux. Because of this, Nietzsche denies change altogether; instead of having transiently stable things that change, there is only the changing.

At this point we seem to be going nowhere. We can agree with Nietzsche on the flux. We can agree that we have concepts that refer to things, i.e., transient stability. We can further agree that we need these things in order to survive and "press the world into our service." But Nietzsche denies that there is any transient stability in nature; there is only the flux in nature. This means that when a rock *seems to* smash our head, when our best friend *seems to* die, when rain *seems to* fall outside, when a sandwich *seems to* satiate our appetite—that all of this is mere interpretation, mere arbitrary ascription of the concept *thing* (or for our purposes, mere arbitrary ascription of the concept *transient stability*). There doesn't seem to be much more that can be said. We have reached the point at which we both see the same thing but make two opposing claims about it: I touch something; Nietzsche only interprets touching something. We shall end with the following divisive question: *Is it really arbitrary that humans walk on what they call the ground instead of endlessly trying to walk on what they call the sky?*